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PETER'S WIFE.

PETER'S WIFE.

A Novel.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“MOLLY BAWN,” “APRIL'S LADY,” “A MAD PRANK,”
“LADY PATTY,” “NORA CREINA,” ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CHAPTER I.

“But God forbid but that men should believe’
Well morë thing than men have seen with eye !
Men shall not weenen ev’rything a lie
But of himself it seë’t’h, or else do’t’h ;
For, God wot, thing is never the less sooth,
Though ev’ry wightë may it not y-see.
Bernard the Monke saw not, all, par die ! ”

“So you really mean settling down here ? ”
says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, bending a scruti-
nizing eye upon her visitor. She is sitting, as
usual, on her high-backed chair, an Eliza-
bethan structure. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss thinks
lounges bad for the morals ; she told her
brother, Sir Stephen Wortley, yesterday, that
half the immoralities of the present age were
accounted for by the modern chair.

“Well—for the present—yes, I really think

so," returns the pretty woman under examination. She gives Mrs. Cutforth-Boss a charming smile, that is as generous as it is sweet, as it lasts right through all her soft hesitations.

"It's a dull country," says her cousin, in a flat sort of way.

"Yes—I know ; but dulness is not always undesirable!" The pretty woman, whose name is "Chance," casts a carefully tender look at her sombre clothes, and sighs delightfully. "I should quite *treasure* a little rest, a little quiet."

"You'll get plenty of both here," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, "ad nauseam!" Her tone is uncompromising ; there is something in it, indeed, that points to the idea that perhaps she is undesirous of having her freshly-widowed cousin in a neighbourhood where she will be obliged to see her constantly. Bella Chance (her maiden name was Grant, and so was Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's) had made a remarkably bad marriage. Mrs. Boss, on the contrary, had made a remarkably good one. Cousins who have got on in life are not

always all things to the cousins who have gone to the wall. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, for example, did not see why her good marriage should be used to defray the expenses that Society is sure to exact from a bad one. She understood perfectly why Bella Chance had come here to this particular part of the county—to whitewash herself and her disreputable husband's memory with the respectability of Mr. Cutforth-Boss.

The latter was the meekest of men, and his wife felt he would be of little use to her in the staying of the invader. Give him

“ A booke and a shadie nooke
Eyther in-a-doore or out;
With the grene leaves whisp'ring over hede,
Or the streete cryes all about,”

and he would ask nothing more of you. A man of letters—a dainty searcher into past and musty volumes—lying so delicately in their dust that never dies—in fact, a happy bookworm! It was a most merciful interposition of Providence that had married Mrs. Cutforth-Boss to the man who bore that name, as undoubtedly she would have killed

any other man. As for *him*, he was impervious to all evils, save those that touched him through his beloved tomes.

"How lovely," says the widow, with the sweetest air of thankfulness. "But I shall have even *more* than rest and quiet, Maria, I shall have *you*!"

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss regards her with amazement. Is she clever, or only a fool? Sometimes it is very hard to decide between the two! She herself, however, is very clever in her own way.

"That is beyond dispute," says she calmly. "I reside here." In her tone there is nothing of the annoyance that she is feeling, nothing of her belief that Bella would never have chosen to live in that little house at one end of the village if she, Maria, had not been living in the big one at the other end of it.

"That is what brought me," says Mrs. Chance, her large, pale blue eyes suffused. "When—when I lost *him*—I—" her lips quiver, she makes a hurried gesture and, finding her handkerchief, lets her face fall into it—"I—lost *all*!"

"There wasn't so much to lose, was there?" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, who disdains to practise the delicate art called Tact. "Two hundred a year covered it, didn't it? and that only when he'd got some practice. If I were you, Bella, I should look things in the face, and give up those clothes," pointing to the crape veil and other signs of woe. "You'll find them expensive."

"I'm thinking of it," says Bella meekly. The slender hands are folded on her lap, her eyes are on her hands.

"Very wise. I hope he left you something."

"His memory!" says the widow, with an exquisite air of grief combined with courage. "What can I want more?"

"Memories leave one hungry!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in her low, bass tones, now basser than usual.

"Oh, no!" says the widow, lifting her pretty head and smiling at her cousin reproachfully. "They leave one *rich*."

"For Heaven's sake," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, breaking all at once into open in-

dignation, "have common sense! If your late husband has left you nothing but his memory, how do you think you are going to live? On *it*? My good girl, there have been many memories, but I do not remember one of them that, if taken alone, would have been strong enough to supply the possessor of it with daily bread. The widows of memories die in the poor-house, as a rule!"

"I don't think I shall die in a poor-house," says Mrs. Chance sweetly.

"No? But if you have nothing——!"

"You are always in such a hurry," says the other; she looks as amused as one can dare to look in such sad habiliments as she is wearing. "Poor darling George was entitled to four thousand pounds before I married him. It was to come from an uncle of his. The uncle on George's marriage was always threatening to change his will—but he forgot to do it—and *he* died the week before—my poor, dear George!"

"That," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, after a quick run through her arithmetical knowledge, "was very considerate of him; still

that four thousand, considering the iniquitously low rate of interest one can get now, will give you only a hundred and fifty a year, at the outside."

"Yes, I know. How clever you are! But Alec has just come back from India, and he has promised to stay with me during his leave——"

"Your brother—but he——"

"He has been invalided home, you know, and he seems very pleased with this part of the world. I hope he will stay with me. He——" Her little usual hesitation comes on again. "He—*you* understand——"

"He is going to allow you so much while he remains with you," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss promptly, "and you count upon him to enable you to keep up the cottage?"

"Yes. How *very* clever you are. Dear old Alec! He says he will stay until his return to India—a year perhaps, or more—but young men are so uncertain! I wish, Maria, you would say a word to him——"

"Certainly not!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, in her most strident tones. "When I speak,

I speak to the point—I say at once all I want to say, and it would be quite impossible to say all *I* want to say in a word! And as for your brother, he must think himself very far gone towards death indeed, to want to come and rusticate here.”

“It’s his chest, he says.”

“Chest or no chest, I never saw any young man look so well as Alec did when I met him yesterday. He was down by the river, and he had his boots and socks off, and was wading into the water to get a fly that had caught in something. He seemed as well as any one I ever met in my life, and very much more indecent. His legs were all over the place. I particularly noted them. They were horrid, and naked, but they were *brown*! I am perfectly certain that the government is being thoroughly swindled over these young men who come home yearly from India, and who describe themselves as being in the last stage of consumption, but are, nevertheless, equal to fly-fishing the day after their arrival.

“Ah! that is a great many words!” says

Mrs. Chance. "I see now what you mean when you say you could not explain yourself in *one*! But don't make Alec unhappy. If you tell him he is not ill, he will certainly believe you, you are so—er—*convincing*, and he will disregard all that the doctors have said to him. This will only harm him, and do no good to anyone, as I shall certainly"—she pauses here, and looks straight at her cousin, with open, ingenuous eyes, but great meaning—"stay on here whether he does or not."

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss looks back at her. A sound, that is almost a snort, breaks from the nostrils of that august woman.

"I see," says she.

"Do you? I *said* you were clever," says Mrs. Chance. A brilliant smile widens her lips, and quite lights up the widow's weeds she is still wearing, more as a concession to her reputation perhaps, than to her heart! "And after all, poor Alec *has* been ill, you know. . . . He was quite a wreck when first he came to me in town. I assure you," prettily, "you are a little wrong about him."

He did not go fly-fishing the day after his arrival from India. He spent that day, and many others, on his back, more dead than alive. But——” She turns suddenly to her cousin. “All this is beside the mark. I came here to-day to ask you to put me *au courant* with the people round you.”

“I have told you it is a small and dull neighbourhood. As for society, you saw most of it yesterday at Lady Hopkins’ garden-party. Good, bad and indifferent were there. The Hopkins woman clings to a crowd. A *tête-à-tête* frightens her. She is shaky about her ‘h’s.’ You know the late Sir Thomas was a brewer—the beer was infamous—actionable, I really think, but he built a Cathedral, or a music-hall, or something, and got knighted. I always want to get up an agitation about that sort of thing. Why should a beer person be addressed by exactly the same title as a baronet whose title may be hundreds of years old?”

“Quite so. I entirely sympathise!” says Mrs. Chance, who is wondering when tea will

come. "But Lady Hopkins struck me as being kind."

"That class of person has to be kind. 'They flatter with their tongue.' If they dared to be uncivil, nobody would go to their houses—that is, nobody who was anybody. And they only care to entertain the 'Anybodies.' However, she is very useful about coal funds and clothing clubs."

"There was a very pretty woman at her party yesterday," says Mrs. Chance. "I forget her name. Oh! here is Alec—he'll remember it."

Going to the open window, she beckons with her hand to a young man who is coming towards the house, across the beautiful lawn—studded here and there with giant beech trees—that is one of the glories of Cutforth Hall. There have been Cutforths at the Hall for over five hundred years. The Boss was added fifty years ago, and brought a great deal of gold with it.

"He has walked up?" says Maria.

"Yes. He promised to call for me and

take me home ; I told him I should leave after tea."

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss rises smartly, and rings the bell.

"We should have had tea before," says she. But it is not apology that is in her tone.



CHAPTER II.

“ Like one
Who having, unto truth, by telling of it
Made such a sinner of his memory
To credit his own lie.”

“ You have come, Alec ? ” says Mrs. Chance, giving a little friendly nod to her brother, as he steps into the room. It is the usual idiotic remark.

“ Yes,” says Alec, nodding to her in turn. “ How d’ye do ? ” says he, turning to Mrs. Cutforth-Boss.

“ Quite well, thank you. Have some tea ? ” Her tone is magisterial as ever, but there certainly is a softening in it. This young man, the brother of the *very* poor Bella, had distinguished himself in some little ways in India. He had been described by his Colonel as a rising young officer, and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss feels lenient towards him. Besides all this, he is very good-looking, and

there is a touch of sauciness in his gay blue eyes that, in some strange way, attracts this queer, rough, manag- ing woman.

“Thank you. Cutforth out?”

“He is studying a volume belonging to the thirteenth century, that has just come under his notice,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss with dignity. She tries to throw indifference into her air, but it is impossible not to perceive that she derives great pride out of her husband’s literary tastes.

To him, she scoffed at them during the occasional moments when they found themselves *tête-à-tête*; which were rare indeed—Cutforth’s sanest movements being in the direction of avoiding her. But to the world she posed as the wife of a true *savant*. Perhaps she would not have admired her “true *savant*” so much if he had taken any hold upon the establishment—if he had dared to interfere with the pros and cons of the domestic arrangements; Maria was a manag- ing woman, and would brook no rivalry in her own line.

She managed everything in Cutforth Hall,

from basement to attic—housemaids' room, butler's pantry, nothing was sacred from her. Husband, servants, tenantry, all alike were under her dominion. They ran a daily race in a daily groove—and it was *her* groove. Her children, thank Heaven, were—*nil*! She would have managed them into the most impossible grooves!

Even her friends did not escape her managing tendencies. There are always some weak members in every community, who fall an easy prey to the strong-minded; and many were her victims amongst the young matrons and the foolish virgins of Bigley-on-Sea.

Now and then there had been a revolt against her in the parish, but the Mistress of Cutforth Hall was a power beyond most, and few in this small place felt strong enough to break a lance with her.

Her voice was the voice of a man, and there lay upon her upper lip a very handsome suggestion of a moustache!

She is an estimable woman, however, in many ways. Sound in all her relations—good wife, excellent friend of the poor, a philan-

thropist to her fingers' ends, but the woman of all others hardest to endure—the woman who thinks *herself* right always, and *you* always wrong.

On medicines she is quite an authority! There is not a known disease in this wide and stricken world for which she could not at a second's notice produce a receipt. Medicine, indeed, is her *forte*. Considering the elaborate moustache that distinguishes her lip, one feels sorry that Providence had not at her conception altered her, and made her a man—a medical man!

The room in which she has received her unwelcome cousin is an index to herself. It is gaunt, bare, uncomfortable. The round mahogany table, brilliant with rubbing, and innocent of clothing, is holding itself very straight, as if with a rather disgusted appreciation of the volumes lying upon it in little sections, two here, three there, and so on, round its immense girth. The volumes are older than the table, and this is saying a good deal for them.

“I have been asking Maria about our

neighbours," says Mrs. Chance, turning to her brother.

He laughs.

"What neighbours?" asks he.

"Why, all of them. But one special one—you have seen her."

"Mrs. Gaveston?" suggests the young man quickly.

"A happy guess!" Mrs. Chance nods her head several times. "I thought her the most charming woman I ever met. Didn't you?"

"That's a large order. I thought her delightful, certainly. But I only met her for a moment yesterday."

"To meet a woman is not to know her," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, breaking heavily into the discussion.

"You have the truth with you there," says Alec Grant. He laughs a little. "But certainly, Mrs. Gaveston struck me as charming—beyond words charming."

"So she strikes everybody at first sight!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss portentously. She draws herself up on her uncomfortable chair,

and sips her tea slowly. It is bitter to her to hear this particular neighbour admired. Mrs. Gaveston, in her quick, impulsive, half-childish way, had given Mrs. Cutforth-Boss to understand, many and many a time, that she would not be managed by her! And Mrs. Cutforth-Boss had resented the silent declaration. Mrs. Gaveston, who is only twenty-three, had treated the elder woman with a sort of laughing contempt. She had shrugged aside all her attempts at advice and admonishment. Had pooh-poohed, in her pretty saucy way, all Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's "My dear, in *your* place, *I*," etc., and had lifted her rounded shoulders against such speeches as, "When I was your age, *I*——" and "In my young days, people never——"

Mrs. Gaveston's lovely gleaming eyes had been *too* gleaming on certain occasions, when Mrs. Cutforth-Boss had been bringing all her weight to bear upon her with a view to reducing her to reason, and clothing clubs, and penny readings, and so forth, and the latter had not forgotten or forgiven the amusement that lay behind that half-angry gleam.

"Women," says she now, "are the most deceitful creatures on earth."

"You *know* you don't expect me to believe that," says Alec, who is beginning to enjoy himself, in spite of his sister's covert admonitory frown. "*You're* a woman, aren't you?" There seem some grounds for this extraordinary question, when one looks at her upper lip.

"I hope so," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss solemnly. "At all events, I feel that I can never accuse myself of an action of which a woman should be ashamed."

"Ah, that!" says Grant. "I'd swear to that on the rack." Alec has now started, and his sister looks with terror at Maria, but to her astonishment Maria is smiling. A grim smile undoubtedly, but anything is better than her frown.

"There are exceptions to every rule," says she, with the graciousness that might belong to an educated elephant. "But I regret to say that Mrs. Gaveston is not all one could desire her. Not that I think her entirely to be blamed. At seventeen she was hurried

into a marriage with a man double her age."

"Double? Is Mr. Gaveston double her age? Alec," Mrs. Chance turns to her brother, "what is twice seventeen?"

"Thirty-four."

"Oh! *too* great a disparity—and for a girl of seventeen——"

"As I say. A mere child. I make a point, you see, of being quite fair to her, though I confess Cecilia Gaveston and I have few interests in common—a fact for which I am thankful to Heaven daily."

"How could her people have allowed it?"

"When people are poor they make many allowances, and the Prendergasts had come down very much in the world. If *I* had been permitted a voice in the matter, the marriage should never have come off. But the mother was a very mercenary woman."

"Her father?"

"He was dead. And the mother I believe hoped to gain comfort to herself through her daughter's sacrifice. However, she only lived a month after the marriage, a most *just* act

on the part of Providence. I always thought very poorly of Mrs. Prendergast—a designing person, of no merit whatever. I regret to say that I think her daughter is following in her footsteps—though I'm bound to confess she seems attached to her child."

"Was that the little fellow I saw with her yesterday?"

"I suppose so. He must be five years old or six—let me see. No, five, Cecilia Prendergast married Mr. Gaveston six years ago last March."

"Is he the only child?" Mrs. Chance is getting through her cross-examination in the most even way. Her cousin hardly knows that she is being questioned.

"Yes, more's the pity. A large family might have sobered her, kept her down. *One* child is of little use; when the nature is frivolous it rises above *one* child. To see that young woman running about and playing bo-peep and other absurd games with her own child, would waken you at once to the fact that she wants chastening. Now if I had *my* way, she would have had——"

"The time-honoured ten in five years," says Alec, giving way to mirth.

"I do not desire the impossible, my dear Alec," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss severely, but not angrily. Mrs. Chance stares at her in astonishment. If *she* had ventured half that, the vengeance of Heaven would have descended upon her head. Has Alec then a hold upon her friendship? The widow feels gayer beneath this hope. And indeed Alec, as compared with his sister, has a good place in the stern Maria's regard. Strange as it may seem, this gaunt, hard woman, who has never known the meaning of love, and to whom passion would mean only immorality, still prefers men to women. "All I say is, that if that extremely flighty young woman were to have a nursery-full allotted to her, all might be—if not *well*, at least *better* ! "

"Nature is such a stumbling block," says Mrs. Chance. "She so often mars one's plans." The widow smiles here in her pretty deprecating way. She certainly is very pretty. Her eyes are nearly as blue as

her brother's, a little paler perhaps ; and her lips are singularly young, considering she is thirty-one. Such rosy, smiling lips, yet at the back of their perfect smile, what is there ? Ambition, secrecy, obstinacy, and a few other things.

“Nature cannot be blamed for the marring of Cecilia Gaveston at all events,” says Maria. “Her husband must be blamed for that. Anything like his silly conduct towards her could hardly be imagined. A man of his age would, one might imagine, be equal to the management of a mere girl like her—but no—he gives in to her in everything. He is positively her slave. I sometimes feel quite ashamed of him.”

“I feel I could make excuses for him,” says Alec thoughtfully.

“No doubt. One man will always uphold another. But I assure you, Bella”—in her excitement over the delinquencies of the Gavestons, Mrs. Cutforth-Boss grows almost friendly with Mrs. Chance—“that her extravagance is the talk of the county. Of course Peter Gaveston is very well off, but

that is no excuse for the woman who seems to spend her time wasting his substance. The fact of the matter is, she is completely spoiled by him."

"I wish some one would spoil a few other women," says Grant, who, yesterday, had not been entirely impervious to the charms of Cecilia Gaveston. Providentially Maria does not hear him. She is now telling Mrs. Chance various other records of the pretty delinquent.

"But how do you mean spoiled?" asks the latter presently, in a little puzzled tone. Her curiosity has got the better of her judgment. And there had been a moment yesterday, when Mrs. Gaveston had been so pretty to her, when she had wondered whether it would not be a bit of wisdom to throw off Maria, who was abominable, and throw in her chances with the lovely married girl who, after all, was far richer, and certainly more desirable than the dour cousin. "She seemed to me——"

"She can seem to you anything in the world you like," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a rather louder tone than usual. She is not

accustomed to opposition of any kind, and resents it accordingly. "She does not suit me; she"—with withering meaning—"may very probably suit you."

"What *you* would object to, Maria, I should certainly not countenance," says the widow with fervour, who thinks it well to draw in her horns here. After all, Mrs. Gaveston seems a very quicksandy sort of person to depend upon. And there is time—time to *decide*. "I can only hope that Mrs. Gaveston will settle down in time, and be a good wife to the good man she has married."

This is all very well and highly moral, but unfortunately Alec has heard her, and now breaks into the conversation with most irreverent laughter.

"I only hope the good man will be a good husband to her," says he.

"There can be little doubt about that. Peter Gaveston is a most *excellent* person," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "I think it a pity, however, he has never been told of her early attachment to her cousin."

"Oh! you grow interesting," cries Mrs.

Chance. "So there was a cousin—a lover—a previous affair?"

"I grieve to say so. Cecilia, three months before her marriage to Peter Gaveston—who is a most worthy person, if *weak*—had a very decided love affair with her cousin, Philip Stairs."

"Stairs!" Grant turns to her quickly. "Stairs of the 90th?"

"Yes," frigidly, "I believe he belonged to that regiment. At all events, she was decidedly *épris* with him before they hurried her into her marriage with Peter. I'm certain Peter never heard a word about it—her love affair with young Stairs, I mean—the mother was too clever for that; and as the young man was gone to India, and Cecilia hadn't a penny, the mother married her to Peter Gaveston."

"But Stairs," says Grant. "By Jove! how odd! Why, he was invalided home with me. Came in same boat—capital fellow too. Now that I think of it, I remember, too, his mentioning the fact that he knew some people here. But he never mentioned names. He wouldn't, you know!"

"I suppose you call that honour," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a withering tone. "I don't. I think if the whole thing had been made clear at once, it would have added to the comfort of everybody; specially of that unfortunate Peter Gaveston. And where is this young Romeo now, may I ask?"

"Not so very far," says Alec. "In the next county, staying with the Wilsons. He is to be here on the twelfth, at the McGregors'—cousins of his, I think."

"Yes, cousins! And so they are bringing that young man into close proximity with that flighty young woman again? They will have much to answer for!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a solemn tone.

"But such an old attachment as that, of course it will be at an end now," says Mrs. Chance. "Those childish affairs, they don't last—such *little* fires, you know."

"I *don't*," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, with decision. "And I know that six years ago Cecilia would have married her cousin, poor though they both were; and he—certainly he too would have married her. But the mother,

as I tell you, put her foot down. By the way, Cecilia has a sister, who is coming to live with her. When last I saw her, just before Cecilia's marriage, she was a wretchedly behaved little creature—a mere unmannerly romp. I can only hope she has grown into something more respectable.”

“When is she coming?”

“To-day, I believe. My brother is unfortunately slightly mixed up with her affairs.”

“Stephen?” Mrs. Chance looks quickly up, and a faint colour tinges her cheek.

“Yes. On the mother's death, the child, Penelope Prendergast, was adopted by an aunt, who had married one of the Stauntons—who, you know, are related distantly to our family. This Mrs. Staunton sent the child to school in France or Belgium, I forget which, refusing to allow her to stay with her sister even during her holidays, for which really I can hardly blame her, when one knows how frivolous Cecilia is. But the aunt died a month ago, and now Cecilia has claimed her.”

“But about Stephen, where does he come

in?" asks Mrs. Chance lightly. There is anxiety, however in her tone.

"Oh! it's *most* annoying; and Stephen is really rather disgusted about it. But it seems this old Mrs. Staunton left all her money to Penelope—about three hundred a year — on condition that Stephen would consent to look after it for her, and see that she did not squander it, or make a bad marriage—at all events, until she is twenty-one. Mrs. Staunton had a curious fancy for Stephen, and sent for him on her death-bed, and, knowing he lived near the Gavestons, entreated him to look after the girl's money—to, in fact, be——"

"Her guardian?"

"Oh, not that! No, really. That would be *too* much," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, shrugging her lean shoulders. "To be guardian to a Prendergast! *No!* Only to see that she does not make ducks and drakes of the money. Bad enough for poor Stephen! But he hardly liked to refuse her on her dying bed. He is sometimes a little weak, you know."

"I wonder the aunt did not name Mr.

Gaveston as guardian. Her brother-in-law would have been surely more suitable."

"I suppose she wanted to make a marriage between Stephen and his ward," says Grant lazily.

"Certainly not! What an absurd idea," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, with ill-suppressed indignation. "You little know Stephen, if you think he would marry anyone but a woman of distinction, of perfect manners and propriety. It would be a lasting cause of regret to me to see an undignified woman at the head of our house. And the Prendergasts are *all* undignified. I feel sure the future Lady Wortley will be all we can desire."

"This girl—is she as pretty as her sister?" asks Mrs. Chance. She has put down her cup and pushed it a little from her, though it is still half-full.

"One never can depend upon reports," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss indifferently, "but I have *heard* she is even better to look at."

"No such luck," says Grant. "Couldn't expect it. Too much for *one* family. Come to look at it, it wouldn't be *fair*!"

Mrs. Chance, for once, forgets to laugh. She is pretending to button her glove, but in reality she is thinking.

"I am thoroughly vexed that Stephen should be mixed up with these trying girls in *any* way," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "Of course he is a model of common sense, but I fear there may be little hitches. You know, when dealing with undisciplined people one gets rubs now and again, and he is in honour bound to see how she spends her money."

"Poor girl!" says Alec. "I really think I'd rather not be left money, if somebody else was to be supervisor over it."

Mrs. Chance here turns more immediately to her brother. The usual pretty smile has returned to her lips.

"No, no, no!" cries she, archly; "what folly. And"—she pauses, and lets a little emphasis fall into her tone—"three hundred a year is a sum not to be despised in these bad days."

She rises, smiling still, and bids her cousin good-bye.

CHAPTER III.

“Her mouth was sweet as braket, or as methe,
Or hoard of apples, laid in hay or heath.”

Down here, by the sea on this perfect day in May, all is beautiful! The little waves run in upon the beach as if in playful attack, and then run back again, laughing always.

The long, straight sweep of the coast leaves the water open, and the little rocks lying like dots upon the near shore shine like stars in the glistening daylight. Here and there upon these tiny islets the seagulls stand—a dream of white and grey—waiting to plunge into the calm waters for their daily bread. Now one rises, with beak filled, and flies for a larger resting-ground, lest those of his fraternity nearest to him may rouse themselves to deprive him of his quarry.

The line of the horizon is very clear! Across it sails a ship, its white sails gleaming like silver in the soft haze of the burning light.

The sea is like glass, so smooth is its surface. Shadows are running over it—and streaks of light—ink-blue and darkest green—the most delicate tinges. And the little white waves, they are always here.

So many tiny bays breaking into the massive rocks! They make one wonder at their strength! All the cliffs are lined and warm with furze, and below, down there in that sheltered beach, with the wavelets running in and out, how lovely are the sea-weeds in the depths of the pools, and the sea-pansies, born of the sand.

There is something else on the small beach, too, even lovelier than the sea-weeds and the pansies! A young girl is moving lightly here and there. A slender creature, clad in a blouse of blue and white, and a skirt to match it—a skirt deliberately tucked up, as if to give free play to the pretty naked feet beneath it. A sailor hat covers the head that belongs to these naked feet, and under that hat is a face that might very properly be termed dangerous.

She has a little red bucket in her hand,

such as children go armed with to the sea-shore, and from her constant peering into the pools that lie amongst the rocks, one may easily see that she is looking for the wild animals that one associates with sand and rocks and retiring tides.

“Here’s another, Geoff!” cries she, with great excitement, plunging her hand into a pool near her, and dragging out a small, but much annoyed crab, who makes vicious dabs at her before she drops him into her bucket. Her voice rings sweet and clear, and reaches the ears of a young man who is coming down from the heights above by a sloping, ragged pathway.

Across this little beach lies the nearest way to Wortley Towers, and the owner of that stately old place is in a hurry to get to it. He stops now, however.

The voice is clear to him, but the possessor of it, being round a corner, is not!

He amuses himself for a moment with the old legend of the mermaids, who are popularly supposed to frequent this particular part of the coast, and might have continued

his fancies, but that all at once a little form comes into view. A pretty lad of five! With sleek brown head, and breeches well tucked-up, and his face rosy with his great exertions. A castle of sand is rising round him, and over the ramparts of this impregnable hold, the owner, happening to look upwards, catches Sir Stephen's eye, and at once goes for him!

"Oh, here's Stephen. Stephen, come here! Nelly, here's Stephen!"

Nelly, the slender figure in the white and blue blouse, grows suddenly petrified.

"Here's Stephen!" Who's Stephen? Good gracious, what is to become of her? She casts a despairing glance at her undressed toes, and mentally gives herself up for lost. The thought of a coming someone, and that some one a "Stephen," is too much for her.

A glance behind show her the entrance to a tiny cave. Who hesitates is lost! Into this she dashes with mad haste, but alas! it is *very* tiny, and any one passing by, with the very commonest eyesight, could certainly see

her. In fact, this little hiding place, to which she has flown for refuge, flatly refuses to conceal her.

Steps coming ever nearer, and the shrill, sweet prattle of the boy, warn her that concealment is no longer possible.

In a frenzied fashion she un-pins her skirt, drops into a sitting position on a small rock near her, about three inches from the sand, and tucking her little naked feet well under her, waits the crack of doom!

"Here she is! Why did you run, Nell?" cries the boy.

Here Nell directs a murderous glance at him, which goes lightly over his closely shorn, and always adored, little head.

"Run?" says she, with a swift, indignant glance at the boy's companion. "I didn't run. I was tired—I——"

"I saw you," says the child; "I thought it was because you hadn't your sto——"

"Geoffrey!" cries Miss Prendergast.

A second's pause, and then:

"You haven't introduced me, Geoffrey," says Geoffrey's friend, smiling at the boy.

“What?” says Geoffrey, staring at him. He is not yet old enough to be a master of the ceremonies.

“I think you ought to tell your——?”

There is a question in his hesitation.

“She’s my auntie,” says Geoffrey, pointing a very sandy fore-finger at the crushed Nell. “But she’s very *little* to be an auntie, isn’t she?”

The boy turns a thoughtful face up to Sir Stephen Wortley. He had once heard Mrs. Cutforth-Boss called aunt by a small nephew of her husband’s, and probably his ideas of what an aunt should be had grown out of that.

“How can I tell?” says Sir Stephen, smiling. “*Your* auntie won’t stand up, so I can’t see how little she is.”

He had spoken quite without *arrière pensée*, but all at once the brilliant, vivid blush that dyes the “auntie’s” cheeks brings him up short. What has he said? Of course finding her with Geoffrey Gaveston, and knowing that Mrs. Gaveston’s sister had come to her a week ago, he had at once guessed who Nell Prendergast was; the girl to whom

his old friend and cousin had made him, in a sense, guardian. It had seemed to him that she too would understand who *he* was, so he had spoken lightly—with a smile. Now it occurs to him that she had resented the lightness of his manner. And why didn't she get up? He had put in that allusion to her not standing up merely in fun. Most girls would get up at an informal introduction like this—in the open air, and under the circumstances.

"Well, Geoffrey, won't you make us known to each other?" asks Sir Stephen, a little stiffly this time, but with a drawing of the boy to him, as if to neutralize his cold air.

"Don't you know her?" asks Geoffrey. "Why, she's Nell and she came last week, and mammy's very glad, because she's her sister" He breaks off here as if thinking. "*I* haven't got a sister," says he. It is evident that he feels aggrieved.

"Your mammy's sister! That's all very well," says Sir Stephen. "You have introduced your auntie to *me*, which is, by the way, the wrong way round, but you have not told her who *I* am."

"You're Stephen," says the boy promptly. "He's Stephen, Nelly, and he lives in a big house over there," pointing indefinitely westward, "and there's lots of rabbits there."

"Not *in* the house," says Sir Stephen gravely. "You really ought to be more accurate, my dear Geoff. And as for your introduction, I am afraid it leaves a good deal to be desired. It is a little general, I am afraid." He glances down at Nell, who rigidly refuses to meet his eyes. "There must be more than one Stephen in the world."

He waits, as if expecting her to say something, but Miss Prendergast remains silent, and the boy, breaking into a fresh burst of conversation on the subject of another small crab he has just found, gives her pause.

Sir Stephen, bending over the child's new-found treasure, proceeds to examine it carefully through his eye-glass, telling himself the while that this girl, whose money affairs have been foisted upon him by her aunt, old Mrs. Staunton, is a silly fool of a little thing, with a pretty face, but without an ounce of brains.

What the deuce did that old woman put him in such a hole for? And why had he not had the common-sense to refuse the trust imposed upon him? If it had been a child even; but a young girl. There is no animal under heaven so sure to give trouble as a girl under twenty.

Meantime, the girl without "an ounce of brains," is gathering herself together. She has taken sufficient courage, during his apparently absorbed attention to Geoffrey's crab, to look up at him. And, all at once, it seems to her that he is the tallest man she has ever seen. Probably the delusion arises out of the fact that she is sitting on the ground, whilst he is standing. Literally she is at his feet—a state of things that if it had occurred to her in its usual sense, would have enraged her. Providentially it hasn't!

She knows who he is now. The child had told her—Stephen. So *this* is the Sir Stephen Wortley, whom her aunt had decided should be guardian over her—not over *her* exactly, but over her money. It seems she cannot dare to spend a penny here or there, without

this man's permission. So *this* is her financial master !

An angry sense of resistance towards him springs to life within the girl's breast, and grows rapidly. The very fact that she cannot get up and confront him, exaggerates this feeling, and brings a little frown to her brow. To be obliged to sit here with her bare, stockingless, feet tucked under her gown, places her at once at such an immense disadvantage. Oh ! if she could only stand up and face him—— But how can she ?

Why—*why* had she not seen him coming ? Why could not that wretched boy have given her a word of warning ? Why—*this* with a secret crunch of her small heel into the sand beneath it—had she ever so demeaned herself as to take off her stockings at all ? *Now*, see what a nice fix she has got herself into, and all through her own folly.

One thing, at all events remains, for which to be grateful. He cannot possibly know her *reason* for sitting here so immovably. Probably—happy thought!—he will put it down to insolence on the part of his ward.

And he cannot know either that her shoes and stockings are lying hidden over there, behind that little rock. If only she can get rid of him, and *at once*. A quick thought comes to her. The best way to get rid of any one is just to make yourself as nasty to them as ever you can! Oh! for an opportunity! It is given her almost immediately.

"Look at him, Nell," cries the boy now, bringing his treasure to her for fresh inspection. "He's bigger than any of yours. He's a monster——"

"Of the deep," says Nell absently. Her gaze, in spite of her, turns to Sir Stephen, and—to her annoyance—meets his.

"I am afraid Geoffrey is hardly up to the mark," says he. "So I suppose I had better introduce myself, as we are to be such near neighbours. I——"

"Geoffrey has not been so stupid as you think," says she, interrupting him softly, but with meaning. "He has let me quite understand who you are. You——"

She pauses, and looks up at him, and all at once it comes to him that his first thought of

her was but an error, and a most sorry one. In the clear eyes uplifted to his, there is meaning, rather distinct meaning now, and spirit—a good deal of spirit, as it seems to him, and not of the mild order either. The owner of those limpid wells could never be “without an ounce of brains.” But why then would she not speak at first?

“Yes?” questions he, smiling. He is looking down at her, studying her, admiring her. The little shapely head, with its soft wealth of chestnut hair, the curved, determined chin, the broad, sweet brow, over which the chestnut curls are straying, the mouth that remains a mystery! Is she tall, or short? *Very* small, it seems to him—but how can one judge, as she sits there, huddled up as it were. Why on earth can’t she stand up, instead of sitting there in that extraordinarily uncomfortable position?—like a Chinese idol, by Jove! But *what* an idol!

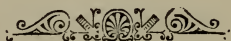
Idol! The word seems to suit her somehow. *Whose* idol?

The very place in which she is sitting seems to suit her. The cave has a wide opening,

but the rocks on each side close it in, and in the midst of the sand and shell she sits as though mistress of it. A nymph, she seems to him, a sea-nymph, a little mermaid. Perhaps that is why she has tucked her feet away so carefully. Perhaps, she has *no* feet!

“Yes?” says he again. Apparently the little mermaid is making up her mind about her answer.

“You are Sir Stephen Wortley,” says she, all at once. “And it is you who are going to prevent me from spending my money!” Her tone is distinctly aggrieved.



CHAPTER IV.

"Fear is often concealed by a show of daring."

SIR STEPHEN laughs.

"Not all of it," says he.

"Still, if I wished to spend it all, I could not, without your permission."

"That is true, I'm afraid."

"You are virtually my guardian, then?"

"That is also true—I'm *afraid*!"

He is still looking very much amused, and Miss Prendergast resents his mirth.

"You are wise," says she, her eyes defying his. "It is well to be prepared. Some day you will be *really* afraid." She gives him a little frown, and a defiant tilt of her chin, as she says this.

"Of course, if you are going to make it hard for me——"

"Not hard. But I shall not make it easy. I warn you that I detest control!"

Here she casts a swift glance at him from under the brim of her big hat. There is anxiety in this glance. Surely she has been nasty enough *now*! She has all *but* insulted him. Beyond doubt, he is going away now—will be glad to go. Oh! certainly he *must* be going.”

Apparently not! To her horror indeed, she sees him casting searching looks around, as if seeking a suitable rock on which to rest himself for the next week or so. What a hateful, *hateful* man! Why can't he go home, and let her put on her——?

He is now peering over her shoulder to a rock near her—*too* near indeed, because behind it—— Oh, “*that* way madness lies!”

She pulls herself together desperately, and wreathes her face in smiles. Those stockings once discovered, how is she ever to assert herself again?

“You look tired—desperately tired,” says she. It is she who is feeling desperate, however. “I felt it the moment I saw you. *So* done up.”

“Tired? Do I?” says Wortley, stopping

short, and looking surprised. He hadn't known it until now. He had, in fact, felt quite fresh as he came down to this small beach. Miss Prendergast nods sympathetically.

"I saw it at the first glance," says she. She is talking rapidly. *Anything* to stop him from going to that rock, behind which—— "One always *knows*, doesn't one?" She smiles at him—a rather strained smile, however.

"Knows?"

"Oh, yes. I could *see*. You looked so *full* of purpose as you came up—I knew at once that you were bent on business." She bends towards him now, and in her eagerness to get rid of him, very nearly lets one small bare toe come to light. Hurriedly she drags it back into its hiding place, growing crimson the while. "Go away," says she. "I mean"—confusedly—"go and do your business, whatever it is. Don't let *me* keep you."

"You're very good. But I'm afraid I'm not so busy a person as you imagine," says Wortley. "I've no very pressing business

on hand just now, and you're not keeping me."

This last is a direct lie, though, perhaps, one might say he was unconscious of it.

"I've been pitching into a tenant over there," says he, pointing towards some fields far away up on the hills. "Lazy beggar, you know, lets the outhouses and fences go to destruction, and then expects me to do them up again. I hate rowing people, don't you?"

"Up to this," says Miss Prendergast thoughtfully, "it is I who have always rowed."

Sir Stephen looks at her.

"I daresay!" says he. It was not the answer she had expected, and she turns a little from him. "Anyway," lazily, "I am exhausted over my fight, and feel a little rest will do me good."

"Not a doubt of it," says she, forgetting her late swift touch of indignation, and growing suddenly almost enthusiastically sympathetic. "A rest is the very thing for you. A nice comfortable *quiet* rest, and in your

own easy-chair at *home*. Not," with a contemptuous wave of her hand at the rocks round her, "such a rest as *these* could afford you!" She bends towards him, her manner has grown quite brisk. She holds out to him a small, sunburnt, but most delicately formed hand. "Good-bye!" cries she almost affectionately. "A rest—a rest is the very *thing* for you. *Good-bye!* Geoffrey and I"—oh! fatal speech—"will have to go home shortly too."

"At that rate, I may as well wait for you," says Wortley pleasantly, all unconscious of the tragic element that is warming the air around them. "Your way is mine, you know. The Towers is only a mile from your sister's place. If you will allow me, I'll stay with you until his Royal Highness over there," pointing to Geoffrey, "is ready to start. There are, I am afraid," with a steady look at her, "a few vexed questions between us that we might smooth away, if we went into them a little."

The steadiness of his gaze alarms her. There is *one* vexed question certainly. How

on earth is she to get back her shoes and stockings, and cover her feet with them without his knowledge? Does he know? Does he mean anything? Or is he only alluding to his odious guardianship? Poor Nell on her stool of repentance wriggles a little. The wriggle very nearly brings her right foot out into the broad glare of the wicked sunshine. She drags it back suddenly, and a warm flush dyes her face.

"You look very uncomfortable," says Wortley. "Can't I find you a better place to sit in than that you have chosen?"

"No. No, thank you," hastily. "I'm all right. I like sitting here."

"You'll get cramped if you sit there much longer; I," his tone is now quite concerned, "I'd strongly advise you to get up and walk about for a bit. These sands are often sure forerunners of a very serious cold. Come," holding out his hand to her, "let me help you up, and let us go for a brisk stroll along this little beach until you must go home."

"No. *Really*," she has shrunk back from his hand as though affrighted by it, "I'd

rather *not* walk. I should indeed. I—I'm awfully happy here. I——”

“As you will, of course,” says he, with a slight shrug. He looks round him, giving again some thought to the little rocks near, as if seeking one on which to sit and work out those vexed questions, those troublesome problems he had suggested to her.

One at last takes his fancy. It is the one nearest to her. It is indeed but a step or two away from her, and undoubtedly it looks uncomfortable; it rises as high as an ordinary table, but, unlike the kind of table from which we all like to swing our legs, it is not broad at the top, but somewhat peaked. Now people seldom like to sit on a peak. He goes towards it, however. As I have said, it is *very* near to her.

“Stop!” cries Miss Prendergast. Her voice rings through the little cave. What is there in it? He hardly knows, but he turns at the sound of it, and looks at her. “Don’t sit there,” says she. “I really *wouldn’t* if I were you. Come and sit here,” she pulls her skirts frantically aside, taking care always to

conceal her feet. "*Here.* It will be *much* more comfortable here!"

It is certainly an invitation ; Wortley looks at her ! There is no mistake about it, however. She is patting the two or three inches of stone laid bare by her hurried edging along the small rock, as though most flatteringly desirous of having his company on it. But the pale, determined face, and the coldness of the hazel eyes fixed on him with what he can hardly refuse to believe is malignity in their gaze, makes him hesitate.

What on earth does she want ? What is the matter with her ? Is she eccentric ? One never likes to say "mad" at first.

"I'm afraid if I sat there, you would be without a seat," says he courteously, with a smile, but a puzzled one. As he says it he walks quickly (it seems a moment for haste !) to the rock he had before signified as a momentary resting place. Here he thought, he would sit, and study her, and if——More people are insane than people dream of——

As he moves Nell rises, and grows suddenly frenzied. Great Heavens ! behind that

particular rock lie her shoes, her *stockings*. One never knows why, but it is a positive fact that one's shoes are always innocent when compared with one's stockings.

Once he gets to that rock, all will be over. He will see her shoes and stockings lying behind it, and will know that she——

“Don't go there!” cries she frantically.
“Don't! don't!”

He is *at* the rock now, but he turns. Good Heavens, *is* she mad? that pretty creature, with those earnest eyes! The thought is a pain to him, and he turns from it, to look over the rock on which he would have seated himself, to see——

Two small high-heeled shoes, and two silk stockings, and two pale blue silken garters lying all together, in the most delicate confusion.

CHAPTER V.

“When anger rises, think of the consequences.”

THERE is a long pause!

SIR STEPHEN stands conscience-stricken. All at once he understands why she was so strange in her manner, so almost discourteous. This is why she would not stand up! Why the deuce hadn't he done as she desired him to do at first—why hadn't he gone away?

An imbecile determination to see, to know nothing, takes him. He turns to her his face, full of a most careful innocence that would not have imposed upon a baby. This guileless expression maddens Miss Prendergast—it seems indeed to make her feet ten times more devoid of shoes and stockings on the spot. She is very young, and when one is very young, one is often angry.

“After all I don't think this rock would make a comfortable seat either,” says SIR STEPHEN, turning his back! upon the pretty

shoes, and trying to look as if he had never seen a garter in his life. It is very clumsily done, it must be confessed. He comes forward and she can see that his face is a little red; but to her indignation, it becomes apparent that his redness is born of a strong determination not to laugh. He looks grave to the verge of tears, but for all that, she is quite aware that he is inwardly dying with laughter. He has overdone the gravity a little. "Perhaps——" continues he.

Miss Prendergast interrupts him somewhat unexpectedly. With an almost imperceptible gesture of her slight arm, she puts him to one side as it were, and leaning forward calls to the little Geoffrey, still busy with his shells and tiny crabs.

"Come here, Geoffrey! Come at once." There is a subdued ring in her voice, that brings Wortley's eyes to her face. "*Hurry!* your mammy will be unhappy about you, if we don't get home soon. Bring me my shoes and stockings; you will find them behind that little rock over there!"

It is certainly, if not a victory, a most

gallant retreat! Sir Stephen, carrying with him a flashing sting from the brilliant hazel eyes, goes quickly to the boy, who is coming with a rush to his auntie (an auntie who is after all only a playfellow), and catching him by the arms, stops him.

"Let me go," says the boy. "Nell wants her stockings, and I want to go home, I'm hungry."

"So you ought to be at this dissipated hour," says Sir Stephen. He swings him on to his shoulders. "Come, let us go and look for mussels to assuage the cravings of our inner man!"

"But Nell——?"

"Your Auntie requires five minutes or so in which to make up her mind whether she will come home with us."

"But she said——"

"I don't believe a word of it," says Sir Stephen gaily.

He carries off the boy, and Nell, left alone in her cave, makes a rueful dash for the unfriendly rock that had failed to help her in her emergency, and, sitting down behind it,

restores her charming little feet to that state required of them in Society.

Presently, emerging once more into the more open daylight, she calls to the boy.

"I am ready now, Geoffrey. Come!"

Not a word, not a look, is vouchsafed to Geoffrey's companion.

"Ah! that's good news," says that imperturbable person. "Geoffrey has confided to me that he is hungry, Miss Prendergast, and though I have worked wonders with mussels, he doesn't seem to find them satisfactory. I," it is a direct question, "I may walk home with you?"

"You have said your way is mine," returns she, courteously but icily.

In silence they leave the tiny beach and get to the road, the boy running on before them in search of flowers and butterflies. This sweet May-day is full of both; warm as the heart of summer, it has enticed abroad all sorts of gleaming insects, and now here, now there, even the delicate butterfly, summer's own delight, is spreading soft wings from petal to petal. A splendid

"Admiral" over there has caught Geoffrey's eye, and away he goes after it, hat in hand.

One steps a little low down here, right into the valley. The sea is lying behind. Above, the sky is burning with a glorious blue heat. But here there is shelter, if only for a minute or so.

"Deep in the glen's bosom
Summer slept in the fire
Of the odorous gorse-blossom
And the hot scent of the briar.

* * * *

"A ribald cuckoo clamoured,
And out of the corpse, the stroke
Of the iron axe that hammered
The iron heart of the oak."

They can hear it, these two, as they go on. Chop-chop-chop. It seems to cut not only into the trees on their right hand, but into the silence that is holding them as in a vice.

At last Wortley breaks it.

"It wasn't my fault," says he. His tone is quite as grave as ever, but, as before, it seems to her that a note of suppressed amusement runs through it.

"Fault?" There is open and not altogether pleasant question in her tone.

“That I——”

“That you——” She stops short, and goes on again. “I can’t see where the word *fault* comes in.”

“Still, it seemed to me——”

“I don’t know what it seemed to you. You are quite a stranger to me. For my own part,” vigorously, “I don’t care a *fig* about your finding them.”

“Finding them?”

“Oh, yes. *Finding them*. I suppose,” with another angry flash from her beautiful eyes, “a person can take off their shoes and stockings if they *like*, without being brought to book by,” with quite magnificent scorn here, “their guardian.”

A moment or two, and then :

“Undoubtedly.” Another moment or two, and then—“By the bye, were *yours* off?”

This is too much! Miss Prendergast stops short upon the dusty road.

“To be a hypocrite, is to be *contemptible*!” says she; she draws her breath sharply.

“That is beyond dispute,” says Wortley.

"Hypocrites are not only immoral, but a bore. You have some one in your mind?"

"Yes, *you*!" says the girl straightly.

Sir Stephen looks at her. Her eyes are flashing, her lips a little parted—such lips, such eyes—both beautiful! What is she, child or woman? Nay, child,

"A wild-eyed child, strong-hearted."

"But I assure you I'm not one," says he.

"Not even when, a moment ago, you said you were sorry you were in fault about—about——"

"Well—about?"

"Finding my shoes!"

"After all, I don't think I was alluding to your shoes when I said that," says Sir Stephen.

"What *did* you mean then?"

"That it was not my fault that I had been, in a way, appointed your guardian."

"Oh, *that*," says Nell. She tightens her teeth upon the under lip, as if to keep herself in order. He has had the best of her here, certainly. He has indeed discomfited her

"these two times." *Her* mind had been full of the luckless shoes and stockings, and he knew that, and traded on it to bring her to confusion over the guardianship.

How contemptible! How mean! Well—
he shall pay for it!

Her small mutinous mouth grows suddenly firm. Her eyes cling to the ground; not a word but "Yes" and "No" escapes her during the long walk that brings them from that beach to the entrance of Gaveston Park. She has been thinking—thinking all the way, and now evidently her thoughts have reached maturity, because suddenly her whole manner changes.

Sir Stephen has opened the gate, and she and little Geoffrey stand inside it.

"Good-bye," says Wortley, holding out his hand, but hardly expecting her to accept it. To his everlasting surprise, however, she slips her slender fingers into his. He holds them in a bare clasp, expecting them to be indignantly withdrawn after the barest pressure, but to his surprise the soft little palm lies in his most willingly.

"I am afraid I have been very cross," says the softest voice in the world.

Is it *her* voice? Wortley glances at her; as he does so, it is beyond dispute that his fingers tighten over hers.

"It is I who——" begins he, but she will not listen to him.

"No, no, no," cries she, laughing—such a pretty laugh! She gives a little upward glance at him. "Good-bye," says she. Her lovely eyes are resting upon his; her lips widen into a perfect smile. He does not answer. Perhaps this great want of courtesy on his part pleases her, because she smiles again, and again murmurs to him "Good-bye," softly and slowly.

As softly and slowly she withdraws her hand from his, and, calling Geoffrey to her, turns away.

After a step or two, however, she looks back.

Wortley is still standing at the big iron gate, watching her. Something in the intentness of his gaze satisfies her.

She laughs aloud as she runs down the

avenue to the house, the boy racing beside her.

“Now who'll be first?” cries she.

Panting and laughing, she draws up at the stone steps of the hall door, and wheeling round, throws up her hands at Geoffrey.

“First, first! I told you I'd beat you,” cries she.

“Race me again,” cries the child.

“No, to-morrow, if you like. But I warn you I shall win.”

She steps lightly into the dim, beautiful old hall, and up the broad, oaken staircase. Half way she stops as though thinking.

“Yes, I shall win!” says she softly.

She is not thinking of Geoffrey, however.

CHAPTER VI.

“ Surely Nature must have meant you
For a syren when she sent you
That sweet voice and glittering hair,
—Was it touch of human passion
Made yon woman in a fashion—
Beauty Clare ? ”

“ I’ve met my Bogie man,” cries Nell, rushing into the dainty boudoir, that the master of Gaveston Park has arranged with such care and love for the beautiful girl he had married six years ago. At this moment the owner of it is looking if possible even more delightful than usual.

She is lying in a lounging chair, with her hands clasped lazily behind her charming head, and her feet stretched lazily out before her. Her pose is grace itself. The indolent, lovely grace of a kitten.

Her soft, hazel eyes, so like yet so unlike her sister’s, have a lazy look too, as if she were but half awake, and her small parted

lips wear the smile of a child—a child who seldom thinks—who lives, and is happy and content—and that is all. Such lovely lips, so red, so ripe, and always a little parted, showing the small pearls within. She looks even younger than Nell—yet she is *almost* twenty-four, and Nell almost eighteen.

As her sister comes in Mrs. Gaveston (she has evidently been doing nothing) brings her arms from behind her head, and lets them fall into her lap with an exquisite abandon. Her small hands, fragile and delicately white, with a faint tinge of pink running through them upwards to the pretty nails, are covered with rings; a tiny jewelled dagger is pushed through the coils of her bright chestnut hair, that she wears in a huge knot low down upon her neck. She is dressed in a tea-gown, loose apparently, yet so arranged as to show each line of her perfect figure. It is made of white silk, rich and velvety, and a few little flounces of priceless lace have been inserted by an artistic hand into the front of it. It is a gown an abnormally rich woman might have worn in her own house when giving a

reception, but hardly the gown that the wife of a country gentleman of ordinary means would wear for her own delectation. From beneath it the dainty laces of her petticoat may be seen, and one small foot clad in a black-silk, open-worked stocking, and a Louis Quinze shoe.

Nature is not always kind, and amuses herself sometimes! She gave Cecilia Gaveston the spirit of extravagance, and no doubt watched her vagaries with delight. Cecilia positively does not know the meaning of the value of money. A child when married to Peter Gaveston, a child she has remained, encouraged certainly by that most foolish man. At thirty-four, he had for the first time in his life fallen madly in love, and when her people induced her to marry him, he had told himself that nothing from his heart's blood downwards was too good for her.

To ask, with the adored child he had married, was to have. Five thousand a year is not a large income, but Mrs. Gaveston's ponies, Mrs. Gaveston's hunter, Mrs. Gaveston's carriage horses became at once the talk of the

county. Mrs. Gaveston's gowns were especially discussed by the women folk.

Mrs. Gaveston herself, however, had been very kindly treated by her neighbours when she came to her new home. She was so pretty, so young—a little inconsequent perhaps, and undoubtedly extravagant, but all that would wear off. And she seemed so gentle, so tender-hearted . . . once her child was born.

The coming of the child had been quite an event. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss was perhaps the only person in the neighbourhood who had not been sympathetic over that "sweet young thing." But then Cecilia had shown herself restive under Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's advices concerning the coming event.

When the child was born—and a boy too—most people were honestly pleased, and Peter Gaveston, holding his wife and son in one embrace, told himself Heaven had been too good to him.

Cecilia had accepted the child as a toy. She played with it, loved it . . . But nothing in her married life seemed to have

roused her to higher thoughts. At times a little cloud would drop into her eyes, but even she herself hardly knew what it meant. One, looking at her then, would say she was a woman disappointed—a woman to whom life was *so* far a failure, that she missed the real *good*—the heart and centre of it all; but the little cloud would disappear so swiftly, and so swiftly would the pretty laugh come back again, that he would deem himself a fool for so saying.

Her love for the child was very strong. It was the strongest feeling she had ever known, but all her ways with it were light and happy, he was her last new gift at first . . . and after that a treasured toy. He was certainly more of an amusement to her than anything else. A delicious doll that could speak and laugh, and hear, and answer her back again.

Her married life had run in such smooth lines, that she had had no cause to repent the step she was compelled to take. The first young grief—young indeed, yet sharp enough to numb her, coming in the first spring of

her youth to womanhood, has been long since put away. Locked aside in a cupboard of her heart, and fastened with an iron key. If unhappily her heart had been locked away with it, it was done unconsciously, and she had never missed it since. The tender girl of seventeen, with her soul just wakening to the one great sweetness of life, is now fast developing into the woman of fashion, quite good, quite pure, and wholly heartless.

She had not understood the shock that had been given her — the wrench — the tear. Philip, her friend, her—yes—her *friend*—there was no other name for him, for no words had been spoken, there were no kisses to be remembered, save *one*! Philip was gone. He had sailed for India almost at a moment's notice, and her mother, seeing Mr. Gaveston's evident admiration for her, had taken her suddenly away to visit some people in Devonshire, leaving no address behind. Even "a moment's notice" might give a lover time to say a fatal word or two, and that was to be prevented at all risks.

Philip Stairs sailed for India without seeing

his little love again ; but he sailed in the full hope that she understood and would wait for him, and that when he came back again, it would be to take her out to India with him.

Six months afterwards he heard of her marriage to Mr. Gaveston !

He had written several letters after his arrival at Calcutta, but it is the simplest thing in the world to put a letter into the fire, as Cecilia's mother has discovered, and Cecilia never knew that he had written. Such letters as they were too ! Mrs. Prendergast must have had a heart of iron to have burnt them. They breathed all the love, the fire, the devotion that unhappily he had not given voice to before leaving. But he had been so happy with his pretty love—and there seemed to be so much time, and he was so sure that she knew—understood—and he was so young himself, that he had kept silence until alas ! the words “too late” were written.

He had certainly endured more than Cecilia. She had felt a little benumbed at first, but though her mother had shown him up in the coldest light, never angered. Only the numb-

ness had grown and increased, until at last she found herself married to Peter Gaveston—and later, the mother of his child—and always the sole aim and centre of his existence.

As for Gaveston he had heard from Cecilia's mother (she was a careful woman) of what she called "Cissy's childish flirtation with Phil Stairs." So the mother had represented the poor girl's growing passion for her childhood's friend. And, indeed, Phil had sailed for India before she spoke to Gaveston of it at all, and then it was in the airiest fashion, laughing all the time.

It was quite a little family joke, she said. She treated it as a joke with Cecilia too, and hinted at Phil's marriage with his colonel's daughter in India. She laughed a great deal at this time, she seemed to Cecilia to be always laughing, and in the end: when no letters came, the girl began to believe in the colonel's daughter, or at all events in *somebody's* daughter.

Phil was gone anyway, and he had not written, and he had said nothing before going.

Perhaps there was nothing to be said . . . she had been mistaken, that was all—such a foolish mistake! And Mr. Gaveston was very kind—*so* kind—and Mama wished it . . . and—it was thus that the matter was arranged.

Not a soul had hinted a word about it to Peter Gaveston. Indeed, as I have explained, there was very little to be hinted. It had been so *slight*! Just the two young people together at tennis parties, and dances, and so inseparable. Nothing more than that. Yet certainly everyone had thought that “something would come of it.” That was how they put it, as though the word marriage was improper so early in the day. Another thing! everyone would have been slow to speak to Gaveston about a matter that so closely concerned him, for though a kindly gentleman, and most tender-hearted, still there was something about him that warned people not to come too near. He was indeed difficult of approach—a shy man, but a proud—at heart.

And of course as years went on, most

people forgot all about that old tale. It sank to the level of a lie. It was indeed hardly remembered until now—now, when the return of Philip Stairs brought it all back again—to a *few*. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss was at the head of these few!

“What? You’ve met Sir Stephen *already*?” Mrs. Gaveston grows interested—she leans forward, her eyes sparkling. “How *clever* of you. I always dread the *first* step in the minuet, don’t you? Well— isn’t he charming? Quite too charming? What did you think of him, eh?”

She speaks quickly—vivaciously—every gesture is wonderfully young.

“He’s not so bad as he might be, if it comes to that,” says Miss Prendergast, with a little contemptuous sniff. “He didn’t swallow me up *quite*! But he thinks a lot of himself in my opinion; and I hate people who smile in the wrong place.”

“In the wrong place?” puzzled. “The *wrong* side of his mouth do you mean?” she laughs.

“Oh, no!” with an emphatic shake of

her small head. "*Not yet!*" this sounds ominous.

"Good Heavens! My dearest Nell. How tragic! What has happened between you and your respected guardian? When *did* the poor man smile?"

"When he found I had been entertaining him for half an hour without my shoes and stockings."

Mrs. Gaveston leans back in her cushions and gives way to a dainty little shout of laughter.

"Ah! you darling girl! I *knew* you would be a comfort—a boon and a blessing to me, like the Waverley pens. Go on! Tell me all about it . . . without," chuckling sweetly again, "your shoes and stockings! How compromising! Oh! you'll *have* to marry him. You will indeed."

"Marry *him*! I like that!" says Nell indignantly. "Disagreeable beast!"

"Don't swear! Come, tell me all about it."

Nell murmurs something about being down on the beach with Geoffrey, catching crabs

in rocky pools, and of the sudden advent of the stranger, and her sudden little flop upon the ground, her inability to get up again, and *The Discovery* in very big letters, and so on.

"He either knew all the time," finishes Nell angrily, who has quite warmed to the work of relation, "which would make him out a cad——"

"He isn't *that* certainly," interrupts her sister.

"Or else he *didn't* know, which means that he is an advanced idiot."

"And certainly he isn't *that*—though anyone with a sister like Mrs. Cutforth-Boss—you have yet to meet *her*)—might reasonably be forgiven for being one. No. I assure you, Nellie, Sir Stephen is one of the most delightful people round us. I agree even with Peter about that." She makes this allusion to her husband in the airiest way. Not at all unkindly, but so *very* indifferently. "Sir Stephen is quite a favourite with us both."

"Twice blessed!"

"Now, really you must try to like him. It will be to your good, you know. He will

have so much to do with your affairs. The managing of your allowance, and I'm *afraid* he's very conscientious, so you will have to be very pretty to him. But he's delightful—the *dearest* manners; and always so nice to me!”

“Oh! if *that's* all. Who *wouldn't* be that?”

“Wouldn't be what?”

They both turn and look towards the door and with very ready smiles of welcome too.

The master of the house has just come in.



CHAPTER VII.

“This life—one was thinking to-day,
In the midst of a medley of fancies—
'Tis a game, and the board where we play
Green earth with her poppies and pansies.
Let *manque* be faded romances,
Be *passe* remorse and regret ;
Hearts dance with the wheel as it dances—
The wheel of Dame Fortune's roulette.”

“CECILIA has just told me, as a matter of surprise,” says Nell, “that Sir Stephen Wortley is always very nice to her.”

“Nice to Cecilia?” Mr. Gaveston smiles slowly—he is a very slow man about most things—and looks at his wife.

“Why not?” says he.

“Just what *I* say,” cries Nell, whose real name is Penelope. “When one is a beauty, one——”

“Nonsense!” interrupts Cecilia, with an affectation of anger, but blushing delightfully for all that. It is not often one worries a

compliment out of one's *sister*. "I won't hear of that. That's folly! A beauty indeed!"

"How is it, Peter?" demands Nell, addressing her brother-in-law with an air that might almost be called a betting one.

"I think we'll let it stand at that," says Mr. Gaveston with a grave smile directed at his wife.

"Oh! you're both in a conspiracy! And as for you, Peter," she looks at him, and makes a charming little grimace, "you're a fool."

"To think you a beauty?" Peter Gaveston's usually quiet air here lifts a little. There is positive adoration in the look he gives her.

"Pouf! We won't go into it," says she. "What we were really talking about was Sir Stephen Wortley."

"Yes, Sir Stephen," says Nell. "A bore I call him, but Cecilia says otherwise. She says he is always what he ought to be, and very nice—to *her*! In my opinion——" Here she catches Gaveston by his coat, and draws him to her. "Come close to me, that I may

whisper to you. It is my belief that your Cissy is—a—*big flirt!*”

At this they all laugh immoderately, as though it were the finest joke in the world, as indeed it is—if *one could not see the end of it!*

“Isn’t she funny?” says Cecilia, laughing gaily. “How lovely it is to have her with me at last, now that that dreadful old woman is dead.” She puts out one of her delicately white and jewelled hands, and catching Nell’s skirts drags her down on to a milking-stool beside her. “I always knew I wanted a companion.”

Gaveston here lifts his head, and lets his eyes rest upon his beautiful wife. Any emotion in the world might be expected of a husband under this remark—which, it must be thoroughly understood, was *unmeant*. There might be disappointment, resentment, anger or some other even stronger feeling; but there was nothing of this in Peter Gaveston’s gaze. Six years had taught him a good deal. There was only the pleasantest reproach in his gaze, and that really meant nothing.

He had had from the beginning a certain amount of friendliness and sweetness from her. He was grateful for so much in the beginning, and she had been so altogether a reflex of that beginning until now, that he had fallen into a fool's paradise, and believed that all she had to give was his—and so he lived content.

“Don't I come in anywhere?” asks he, but with the happily reproachful air of a man who believes in no misfortune so far as the love of he and his wife are concerned.

“Oh! you!” says Cecilia. “You are always there, of course.” She gives him the sweetest little glance. “But consider, Peter! You hunt all the Winter, and you farm all the Spring, and you worry your poor tenants all the Summer, and you begin your hunting again in the Autumn; and after all where do *I* come in? What do *I* do?”

There is a jest only in her tone. But the jest seems to at once hurt and delight him. He turns to her quickly. *Has* she missed him now and then?

“Have you been lonely, then? Have I failed so far?”

“Oh, *you!*” Mrs. Gaveston leans back in her lounging chair, and holds out a charming hand to him. She has crossed one knee over the other, and the exquisite lace frillings of her petticoat come into view. “*You are an angel!*”

At this they all laugh again.

“A substantial one!” says Nell, and, indeed, Gaveston is a man of grand proportions. Cecilia is holding out her hand to him. Such a little hand! He takes it, and bending over it, presses a most honestly fond kiss upon it.

She seems like a mere child next to *him*. Gaveston is six feet one, if an inch, and a well-set-up man besides. He has a noble chest, broad and strong, and a head most handsomely set upon his shoulders. He is certainly not a “beauty man,” so far as features are concerned, but there is more beauty in the open glance of his kindly eye, and in the delicate strength of his well-bred mouth, than most so-called handsome men

could lay claim to. He looks quite his forty years, but not a day more, and a man of forty is still on the right side of life. There is, however, something a little incongruous in his large, massive, thoughtful style and the dainty, vague, childish loveliness of the wife he has chosen.

They are still laughing, when the door is pushed open, evidently by a foot, and the child enters, his hands and arms full of shells, which he deposits, without a second's notice, upon his mother's silken lap.

"Oh! Geoff!" cries Nell, rushing to the rescue. The soft, priceless, little lace flounces seem sinking beneath their burden.

"I say, Geoffrey, you *might* think of your mammy," says his father, in tones of remonstrance.

Nell glances hastily at her sister, who is half a stranger to her as yet, expecting a dainty expression of anger, of horror.

Not at all! Mrs. Gaveston puts up her pretty hands, and drags her boy's head down to her own, and kisses him proudly.

"Why, that is just what he has been

doing," cries she gaily. "Thinking of his mammy. See all these lovely shells he has brought me. And all so *clean* too."

She looks at the child with question in her eyes.

"I washed 'em," says Geoffrey smiling, laying his small hands upon her shoulders, and shaking her slender figure to and fro whilst she smiles back at him. "They were sandy all over, but I scrubbed them all out, and polished them with a bit of flannel that Mary gave me."

"There!" says Mrs. Gaveston triumphantly. She is looking at the child, and now her lips widen into a laugh. She lays her own bejewelled fingers upon the boy's shoulders in turn, and together they rock to and fro, until at last, with gazing in each other's eyes, they both burst out laughing. It is the prettiest sight. The child laughing into his mother's eyes, and the mother, who looks herself a child, laughing back at him. "Isn't he sweet?" cries she suddenly to Nell, looking over the boy's shoulder. "Isn't he a precious thing? Fancy his washing them,

and *polishing* them before he brought them to me. Oh! Geoffrey!" giving him a vigorous little push, "you're a small snake. You are gliding, and gliding, and gliding into my heart, coil by coil, until at last there will be only room for you."

"Bad law for the rest of us," says Gaveston, catching his little son, and flinging him up to his shoulder.

"He's the image of me, Nell, isn't he?" asks Mrs. Gaveston lazily.

"Yes; but he's got his father's eyes."

"Do you think so? Oh, *no*. Surely *not*, Peter?"

Mr. Gaveston, who is playing with the boy, answers leisurely:

"*Your* eyes, we'll hope. You *are* a beauty, Geoff. Eh?"

"Yes, he's like me," says the pretty woman conclusively.

"I want to be like pappy," says the boy suddenly. "I want to be a man. I will *not* be a woman."

"Well, you shan't," says his father consolingly.

"But what have *I* done to you?" asks his mother, with exaggerated reproach.

"Nothing! Only I want to have a red coat, and a hunting horse like pappy."

"Oh, if *that's* all," says Cecilia laughing.

"'Tisn't much of an ambition," says Gaveston.

"To be like you? Oh, I think it is," says his wife charmingly. "Geoffrey," quickly, "what are you doing? Trying to garotte your father?"

Indeed, it looks like it. The boy has now got fairly on to his father's back, and has both his sturdy young legs crossed round his throat. His arms follow his legs and the little lips are pressed to Gaveston's ears.

"What is it now? Want *me* to be a hunting horse? Well, here goes?"

Gaveston walks to the door and from thence throws back a glance at the two women.

"If I don't turn up again you will know what has happened to me," says he with a sort of slow humour.

Mrs. Gaveston flings herself back in her

chair with a sharp sigh. Nell uncomfortably asks herself—Is it of relief?

“I always hate people to say queer things like that,” says she. “I’m shamefully superstitious, I know that. But really, to say even in jest, that one might never turn up again——”

“Don’t be in the least uneasy—at all events on *this* occasion,” said Mrs. Gaveston, with an idly amused air. “Peter is always *sure* to turn up again, whoever else may not.”

Something in her air, her manner, induces Nell to go a little farther into the matter.

“I do like Peter,” says she, heartily. “I always thought I shouldn’t, you know. His being so much older than you are——”

“Oh, he’s a dear. A perfect dear,” says Mrs. Gaveston enthusiastically; “you know I *said* he was an angel a while ago. And I meant it, I did indeed. Of course one could wish him a little—well—*prettier*,” laughing, “and with a little more hair on his blessed head—but really beyond that there is nothing to complain of.”

This very negative praise makes Nell wonder. Nell! who has gone down before Peter's charm of manner and kindly courtesy, and who has already the germs of a most faithful affection for him in her somewhat flighty breast. Why does Cissy talk of him like that? Dear good old Peter. Do all wives talk of their husbands so? No—No—of course not. And of course Cissy meant nothing. It is only that she is a spoiled child, too lovely, and too much beloved.

The lovely Cissy is looking at her now, with an amused smile upon her lips.

"Well! What is it?" asks she, "your mind is full of someone."

"Of *you*, then—if I must tell the paltry truth. That gown, Cis. It is a triumph."

"So it ought to be," says Mrs. Gaveston with a shrug. "Such a sum as she has charged for it. Fancy a little thing like this," lifting a bit of her skirt, "costing twenty-two guineas!"

Miss Prendergast examines her carefully from head to heel.

"Really, I think it's cheap," says she. The

family failing of extravagance has evidently been inherited by her too.

“Oh, I daresay! But Peter won't look at it as you do. Lately he's been growing so particular. And of course, when I ordered this gown, I *never* thought it would come to so much.”

“Yes, and he——”

“He. I haven't told him. He was a little annoyed over my last bill. Not *annoyed*, you know. He is always so kind, so *good*, but he said he thought I was old enough to learn the value of money. And really, I *am*.” She pauses and casts a half-dignified, half-troubled glance at Nell. “I wish *I wasn't*,” says she. “I wish I was only three years old again: then no one could say a word to me.”

“Then you would not have the knowledge to dress expensively,” says Nell laughing. “You couldn't have designed pictures like *that*,” pointing to the gown in question. “You *did* design it?”

“Well, partly. I saw a gown like it at Lady Overton's one day, and I idealized it,

and *here* is the result. But honestly, Nell, this gown disturbs me ; you see my allowance——”

“What is it?”

“Two hundred a year. I really think he might make it two hundred and fifty, don't you?”

“Ask him.”

“I couldn't! He has said so much about my extravagance already. And really perhaps I *am* bad in little ways like that. Anyway, I can't ask him *now*. It is only three months ago since he paid a bill for me.”

“A big one?”

“Three hundred pounds. It really ought to have been *five*,” says Mrs. Gaveston, “but—it is such a comfort to have some one to talk to, Nell. I hadn't the courage to tell him *all*. He is *so* grave and *so* big, and *so* solemn ; isn't he *now*?”

“Do you know I think *I* could tell him,” says Nell.

“Well, *I* couldn't. And you don't know him. I think he would be very angry.”

"If you are only *thinking* that, after being married to him for six years, there can't be much in it. But don't worry yourself, Cissy. You know I've got a lot of money. *Heaps!*" spreading out her hands, "and I'll give you some of it."

"If," says Cecilia, laughing, "your guardian lets you."

"Oh! as for *that*," she makes a saucy *moue*, "you'll see for yourself presently about that. I'm not a child, to be made go here and there."

Mrs. Gaveston's lips widen into a more amused smile.

"You look like it, anyway," says she.

"Oh, *well!*" It is plain that Nell is a little annoyed. "What is it you want then? Two hundred pounds?"

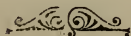
"Nonsense. As if I wanted *you* to pay my bills. Tut, you silly thing. There! go and play with Geoffrey, that's your proper *rôle*. He's in the garden with Peter. After all," springing to her feet, "I think I'll go with you."

"In that gown?"

Mrs. Gaveston pauses for a moment, but she has got out of the habit of being checked.

“I can throw the tail over my arm,” says she lightly. “And even if I *do* do it an injury, why, I don’t care! I hate it. It’s too expensive! I feel sure I’ve been swindled by that woman; and after all I can always order another.”

She runs out of the room and down the stairs, far more lightly than Nell.



CHAPTER VIII.

“ Men who have but little business, are generally great talkers.”

“ SHE ought to be ashamed of herself,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in her deepest tones.

“ Who is it now ? ” asks her brother.

There is a smile—if a rather bored one, upon Sir Stephen’s face.

“ Bella Chance ! without a farthing in the world, she is evidently bent upon making a show.” Mrs. Cutforth-Boss would have been indignant if anyone had told her she ever dropped into the lighter modes of expression of the present day, which she calls “ slang,” but sometimes unconsciously she uses them. “ So ridiculous of her. Look at her gown. Ten guineas, if a penny.”

“ She is such a young woman, and so *very* charming,” says Mrs. McGregor in her soft voice. She is herself an elderly woman and decidedly plain. But some plain and elderly

women are very delightful to look at, and Mrs. McGregor is one of them. She is looking a little tired now, having been moving about amongst her guests for the past hour, and has thankfully accepted the seat next to Mrs. Cutforth-Boss that Sir Stephen has kindly pushed forward. A woman of an entirely sweet nature herself, she has been able to see beneath the crust of Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's and to acknowledge the crude worth that lies beneath.

“And uncommonly pretty,” says Sir Stephen.

His sister casts a sharp glance at him.

Below, the gardens are sparkling in the sunlight. It is hardly yet the “time of the roses,” as June is waiting for poor old May to die, but other flowers are flaunting their delicacies here and there and everywhere. To their left the tennis courts are making a gay racket, and beyond them again the rapt golfers are playing most anxiously and excitedly, although the links are tiny, and the whole thing a mere drawing-room game.

The McGregors are “at home” to-day.

Scotch people, who had taken a very beautiful place in this small neighbourhood ten years ago—Heaven alone knows why—and who are just now being acknowledged as residents. For those ten years they have been regarded as outsiders and strangers, although they are of good family, and better off than anyone around them ; still they have not been *born* into the purple of Bigley-on-Sea, and the careful controllers of that small place are shy of strangers. Ten years, however, proves many things, and lately it has been acknowledged with *caution* that the McGregors are quite all they ought to be, and quite worthy of being admitted into the bosom of the Bigley-on-Seas. They had been kindly received, certainly, in the beginning—they were immensely rich—but received as outsiders. *Now*, within the last year, they are being admitted to the inner circle, the very heart of this little aristocratic place.

Mrs. McGregor has been described, if one *could* describe her. That is, all the *goodness* of her. And Mr. McGregor, a burly Scotchman, need hardly be described. One daughter

born to this house requires only a line or two, though she *is* an heiress and that on a very big scale too. A tall girl, ugly, with good manners, splendid freckles—as freckles count—the reddest hair in Europe, and a snub nose it would be hard to beat.

“She *may* be pretty,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. “I am not a judge of those things. To be good is to be beautiful in my eyes, and there are other people *called* pretty—Bella, for example; as to *her*——” She kindly refrains from further explanation. “I shall speak to her, I really *shall*. She wants someone to give her some sound and honest advice, and I, as a cousin of hers, am the fit and proper person.”

“*Poor* Bella!” says Stephen.

“For once I agree with you, Stephen,” says his sister, who, as has already been said, is totally devoid of the Divine gift of tact. “She is much to be pitied; a mere inconsequent creature with no ballast!”

“You can supply it,” says Sir Stephen pleasantly.

“Well, I hope so—I *think* so.” She turns

to Mrs. McGregor. "What a tremendous crowd you have here to-day."

"Yes, yes," says her gentle hostess, colouring a little. There is no doubt but that some of the off-skirts of society are here to-day. Good people, and kindly, but hardly—*hardly* county folk. "Of course there *are* a few—who—but—it makes them so happy," says Mrs. McGregor nervously. "And it is well to do that. And—we are all brothers and sisters, you know."

"'Pon my word, when you come to think of it, it is just so," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. "But then, when you were about it, why didn't you ask your butcher and baker?—*they're* your brothers too," says.

Sir Stephen turns a dark red at this frightful rudeness, and makes a slight attempt to speak, but checks himself. If Maria has been born so entirely without decency, how is anyone to supply it?—certainly not *he*. A quick memory of his mother comes back to him—fair, gentle, tall; and of his father—a bluff old squire, but incapable of a *bêtise* of this sort.

Meantime, Mrs. McGregor has risen.

“We’ll discuss it later,” says she, with undiminished sweetness. Some late guest has just arrived, to her everlasting delight. Her principles have always been a difficulty to the gentle woman, and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss has just given her a nasty fillip. If she has asked So-and-so because he is a brother and a Christian, then why not ask her bootmaker, who is, beyond doubt, the most Christian man in the neighbourhood?

Poor Mrs. McGregor goes forward to greet her guests with a heart most ill at ease.

“I wonder if it ever occurs to you, Maria, how abominable a thing it is to hurt the feelings of anyone,” says Sir Stephen angrily, when his hostess is well out of hearing. “I believe you pride yourself upon being strong-minded; but if having a strong mind means being capable of making one of the gentlest women you know extremely uncomfortable, I think it would be a merciful thing to be born without one.”

Mrs. Cutforth Boss looks at him with calm astonishment.

"I suppose you are alluding to what I said to her just now?"

"Certainly I am. To tell a woman to her face that her guests are beneath notice is, to say the least of it——"

"Stephen," interrupts his sister solemnly, "it has always been a grief to me that you won't go *into things*! Now, what Mrs. McGregor wants is *solid advice*. She is a good woman—that I admit—but a most mistaken one. She—it is a frightful thing to say—but, in my opinion, she is fast developing into a *Socialist*. She would have *all* men on an equality—you heard her yourself."

"Indeed, I heard nothing of the kind!"

"I daresay. I have often thought you a little wanting in intelligence!" says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss warningly. There is not a note of malice in this speech, she is as a fact very fond of her brother. "You should cultivate *observation*! I feel I must speak to you about that some day, Stephen. Really the people that poor woman has gathered here to-day! You know I am not bigotted about the masses, but one *must* draw a line

occasionally. Now those Biggses!—*who* are they?”

“Very respectable people!”

“Entirely so. And as I pointed out to Mrs. McGregor, so are her butcher and baker; really the baker is about the best man we have at our penny readings—so well-read for a man of his station—twice as well-read as those Biggses!”

“Still, there’s a difference between a baker and a—gentleman farmer.”

“‘Gentleman farmer’ includes so much. By-the-bye, are you going to ask Biggs to the Towers next Friday?”

“No,” says Sir Stephen, and then feels himself the biggest snob on earth. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss laughs; she has scored here.

“After all, I was wrong, you have *some* intelligence!” says she.

The grounds are now growing quite full. Lady Hopkins has come—always, in spite of the brewery, a little celebrity; and she has brought in her train several young people. She is fond of young people, and they are fond of her.

The Gavestons have just come too, and Mrs. McGregor hurries forward to meet them.

Cecilia has brought her husband and Nell, and a young man who is often a visitor at Gaveston Park, with her. He turns up, indeed, so frequently at the Park, that he is already quite an old friend of everybody at Bigley-on-Sea.

He is an Irishman, and his name is Michael McNamara, and one minute's conversation with him would tell the most simple-minded that he hailed from the county Cork.

His brogue is the most mellifluous thing on record, and there have been rude people who have said you could hang your hat on it; but he is a beautiful Irish boy for all that, and very full of the *best* sweetness and light.

His age no man knoweth, but he looks about twenty-five; his manners *occasionally*, however, would bring him down to the five *without* the twenty! In fact he is sometimes—it is sad to relate it—a little trying to his friends.

For all that, his friends at Gaveston Park like him more than ordinary, and Nell, who is only a week-old acquaintance of his, con-

siders herself now, on this, the seventh day of it, quite a settled chum.

Cecilia has dropped languidly into a chair, and Mrs. Chance, who is looking very pretty in her new black frock, that is of a most tenderly if fashionably sad kind, has seated herself beside her. *Why*, it would be hard to imagine, as Mrs. Gaveston is at times a little difficult to get on with, unless it is because Nell is standing close to her sister, and Sir Stephen close to Nell.

Mrs. Chance from time to time during her animated conversation with Cecilia—which is altogether on one side, as the capricious Cecilia has decided she does not like her—glances towards Nell and Sir Stephen.

Nell is in her prettiest mood. She is evidently what Mrs. Chance calls (who is certainly very vulgar *inwardly*) “plaguing Sir Stephen.” Where is Alec? Mrs. Chance looks hurriedly round for her brother. He had seemed so distinctly *épris* with this interfering girl only yesterday, at Lady Hopkins’. Ah! there he is! And, evidently, looking for someone. She leans lightly forward, and

casually as it were, draws out her handkerchief. The white spot on the green landscape catches her brother's eyes ; he looks up to the terrace above him and sees his sister.

She makes a slight gesture, smiling delicately (a sister can always let a brother know what she means when she *wants* to), and in a moment he turns and come straight to where Nell is sitting. He feels very grateful to Bella. He had been looking helplessly for Miss Prendergast for the past ten minutes.

The little group on the terrace has grown quite large now. Miss Prendergast, from beneath the shelter of a big white hat, is looking, with the suggestion of an exquisitely dawning friendship, now at Sir Stephen and now at Alec Grant ; perhaps sometimes Grant gets one glance in to the good. If he does, however, it is not without the bestower of it knowing all about it.

"Golf is going on over there," says Sir Stephen presently, when a second glance has been purposely given to Alec, without one to him coming in between.

"Yes ? "

"You like it?" questioninglly.

"Ye-es, very much," with hesitation.

"There is tennis over here," says Grant quietly.

"Oh, I know ; but the courts are all full."

"No," eagerly, "one will soon be vacant ; that's what I came to tell you. Will you have a set with me?"

"I should like it," says Nell slowly. Sir Stephen walks away. Nell casts a swift look after him, and laughs inwardly, after which she settles down to a steady flirtation with Grant.

Bella Chance is carrying on still her desultory conversation with Mrs. Gaveston, and in the distance Mrs. Cutforth-Boss is giving advice to a young woman who is beginning to look faint.

"Who's that?" asks Mr. McNamara, regarding the former anxiously. She had been holding a meeting in the North on "The power of well-directed advice," when last he was at Bigley-on-Sea.

"That's Mrs. Cutforth-Boss," says Nell, bending towards him with an admonishing air.

"Boss? American?"

They all laugh.

"My *dear* fellow," says Grant, who, though he is her cousin, or because of it, detests her cordially. "Look at her clothes!"

"Well, she ought to be, with a frightful name like that."

"It isn't her name, however, it's her husband's," says Bella Chance. "Her own was quite a nice one—Wortley." Mrs. Chance seems to linger over the nice name, lovingly.

"I bet her husband thinks it a pity she didn't stick to it," says Mr. McNamara, buoyantly.

"Oh, no; he is quite a *friend* of hers," says Nell. "Isn't he, Mrs. Chance? You know," mischievously, "Mrs. Chance is her cousin."

"Oh — er — *I say!*" mumbles Mickey wretchedly, going under. To his intimates—and they are nearly everyone—Mr. McNamara is always Mickey. He grows very red and casts a thunder and lightning glance at Nell, who receives it nobly. She *might* have given him a wink, anyway! However, to tell the truth of Mickey, he is full of pluck, and presently he comes to the surface smiling.

"Never would have thought it," says he, beaming tenderly on Mrs. Chance. "Cousins, as a rule, are as alike as peas, but in this instance, I'm bound to say you're all the peas and she's all the pods!"

This elegant compliment is received most graciously by Bella.

"You needn't apologise," says she, with a faint grimace. "I'm not a bit angry." She has said hardly anything, but to Mickey it becomes perfectly clear that she could see her cousin, Maria Boss, toasting before a slow fire, without so much as a protest.

"You're *so* good!" says Mr. McNamara sweetly. "Well, I won't, then; but I confess I'm curious about your cousin. What does she do, eh?"

"Do?"

"Yes. She's bound to live up to a name like that anyway."

"Oh, she does—she does," says Mrs. Gaveston, breaking in with a faint shrug of her pretty shoulders, "she 'bosses' this village all through!"

There is a slight pause.

CHAPTER IX.

"Love is strong as death. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."

McNAMARA is laughing.

Mrs. Chance lets her perpetual smile fall into her lap this time. She is thinking, treasuring up little words here and there. There is no knowing how soon or how late they may be useful. This girl, Nell Prendergast, is in her way, and must be put out of it, and all that belongs to Nell Prendergast must be put out of it too. It will be amusing later on to tell Maria Boss what this disdainful pretty Mrs. Gaveston has said about her.

"I think I never saw so many girls together as to-day," says Mrs. Gaveston at this moment, looking over the railings of the top terrace to the grounds below. "They seem to have come in their thousands."

"Bound to," says Mickey, sticking his glass

into his good eye by mistake—as a matter of fact, one eye is as good as the other, and both are remarkably lively, but he likes to think he is in danger of losing the left one. “There’s a new man come to the place. In fact he’s here. A guest of the McGregors; and a tremendous catch, I hear. No end of ha’pence!”

“What a wild romance,” says Mrs. Chance, who, however, beneath the lightness of her air seems interested. “And the hero of it?”

“Best fellow in the world. I met him in Donegal some years ago. He was staying there with some of us” — evidently Mr. McNamara’s family is large and united. “He has been in India for a bit, but is home now on sick leave. I only heard of his coming an hour ago, or I’d have gone in search of him.”

“But how a catch?” asks Mrs. Chance, with the lightest, the most casual air in the world. Alec had said nothing about *money*!

“Well, it seems his uncle died the other day, and left him the only original half-million.”

"Lucky man!"

"To gain half a million?"

"Oh, no, I was thinking of the uncle. To die!"

"Cissie! what a queer thing to say," says Nell, with a little frown. She looks distressed. Her brilliant sister looks back at her and laughs gaily.

"To die with half a million to leave! See what joy his death must have given to many—to one at all events, if we can credit Mickey's tale."

"Oh, you *can*," says Mickey, dejectedly. "Lucky you may call *him*, anyway. Most of us have got uncles, but they seldom run to half a million, and when they do, they don't leave it to *us*. They know better, they say. They might as well be fathers for all we get out of 'em."

"But really, Mickey——"

"Oh, *I* know. I'm an authority," says Mickey, with open disgust. "Think *I* don't know about uncles. The rich ones—who give—I confess I don't know about them; they belong to the few, but as to the others,

I'm all there. I know them well to my sorrow. Most of my uncles are borrowers!" Mickey shakes his head sadly. Evidently his relations have led him a life or two.

"And the rest of them lenders," says Alec Grant, with an ill-suppressed grin.

"Oh, hang it! That's a beastly old joke," says Mickey. He catches the third and last leg of the stool on which Grant is sitting, and brings him lightly to the ground.

"I say, look here, this is very low treatment," says Grant, laughing.

"I wish it could have brought you lower."

"Well, isn't it true? You've more uncles among the lenders than the bor——"

"He's not well," says Mickey, interrupting him just in time, and with an air full of anxiety. "High-overs don't agree with him!"

"They do," says Grant, who has fallen right at Nell's feet, and now shows no disposition to get up again.

"I was telling you, I think, Mrs. Gaveston," says Mickey, "about the *rara avis* that has flown into our midst. Such a beautiful bird! He is," glancing cautiously from right to left,

"staying here, so we must be careful what we say."

"Why? Is he deformed?" asks Mrs. Gaveston, in her pretty tired way.

"Tut!" says Mickey. "One of the handsomest men in England, I hear—beats the record for *this* year. They say he is engaged to the divine Elspeth."

"Beauty and the beast then," says Mrs. Chance.

"Oh! poor beast!"

"By Jove!" says McNamara at this minute, "here he comes!"

Nell has not heard this whisper, and Grant, who is now falling into a deeply interesting discussion with her, does not hear it either. Cecilia, however, does. And turns a languid glance in the supposed direction of the coming of the conquering hero. So slowly does she turn, however, that before her eyes reach the desired point, they find themselves arrested, and returning a very curious glance from Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, who is sitting about three yards away.

The glance is so curious—so—*expectant*, as

it were—though what is there to expect?—that it arrests Cecilia's attention. She is still wondering about it, when a voice near her says :

“He is an old friend of yours, isn't he?”

Mrs. Chance is bending towards her, the usual smile in her eyes is a little enlarged now, and there are a few grains of vindictiveness in it. She knows what is coming, and knew all the time, for the matter of that, whilst Mickey was idly chattering and her brother laying siege to Nell, but to see the *dénouement*—to find this lovely, unfriendly woman a little at fault would be, she told herself, a quick delight to her. Of course, it might not come off—but if it did——well, it would be a shaft in her quiver for Sir Stephen. A family like that; the elder sister so—so—unprincipled—and the girl——. One could see that she ran the same road—so impossible—so fast, in a *little* way, no doubt. But little things always grew!

“He? Who?” asks Cecilia, in the pale sort of way in which she always addressed Mrs. Chance. If Mrs. Cutforth-Boss is objection-

able to her, Mrs. Cutforth-Boss's cousin is a thousand times more so. She looks indifferently at Bella, who is really looking her best, and extraordinarily young in a new black gown with a little—a *very* little crape upon it.

Mrs. Chance is opening her lips to answer, when suddenly Grant rises to his feet, and calls aloud to some one. Some one who is just here.

“Why, Stairs, old fellow, is that you? I say, Phil, I thought you weren't coming till next week.”

Mrs. Gaveston looks quickly round. She makes a slight effort as if to rise, and then desists. The effort is beyond her. Her colour is all gone, but her eyes have gained in brilliancy! They are staring—staring——

“I didn't really mean to come till next week,” says some one.

Her face grows rigid. She leans back in her seat, a faint, unheard moan escapes her. Oh, God! that voice. That voice!

CHAPTER X.

“ My bed and pillow are cold,
My heart is faint with dread.
The air hath an odour of mould.
I dream I lie with the dead,
I cannot move,
O, come to me, love,
Or else I am dead.”

For a moment Cecilia knows nothing. It is the barest moment, but to her it seems like a century. And what it holds !

All her youth, her sweetness, her delight, her dreams of loving and being loved. Had she ever known till now—now, after the passing of so many dead, *dead* years—that she had ever lived? Ah! then—then she had lived. But did she know it then?

Coming back to herself, she is conscious of a strange cold chill. Her hands are like ice, and her lips are frozen. She feels frozen, body and soul.

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Then it is all over. It had been a sicken-

ing moment, but it is over for ever! and she wakes to find herself in her chair with Mrs. Chance's searching blue eyes fixed full upon her.

Everyone is looking in the direction of the new-comer, so that very few have noticed the shock she has sustained; no one, indeed, except Bella Chance and Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. They had seen all.

That sudden brilliant light in Mrs. Gaveston's eyes, the sudden leaning forward, the abortive attempt to rise, the slight unconsciousness—*all* had been seen by those four watchful eyes. Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, most virtuous of women, had kept the frivolous Cecilia in view all the time, whilst Cecilia unfortunately had forgotten her existence.

But now Cecilia is wide awake, the shock is all gone, it is drifting away, leaving her behind it, high and dry. It had been so *stupid*, that first thought—as if she and Phil had ever been anything more than friends—mere friends. She, an old married woman, with a child!

The thought of the child gives her a queer

feeling for a moment . . . but it goes by—floating away with the rest. She laughs to herself as it goes away from her—sailing—sailing so lightly. And rising to her feet she goes forward.

Her eyes are fixed on the strange young man—over there at the end of the terrace. Her lips are parted—a happy smile now plays upon them. Unthinking to the last, she hardly knows why she smiles; she never dreams how her smile is interpreted. He is her friend—her friend only. He is very near her now; but so far he has not seen her.

He is a tall, very dark and very handsome man of about thirty, with a face well bronzed by an Indian sun; and many people are standing round him, talking to him and giving him a cordial welcome home.

He has just turned away from a lively reception from Mickey, when a soft sound comes to him that makes his heart stand still.

“Phil,” says a low and lovely voice.

He turns. . . To see—the one love of his life! the lost love of his life!—before him.

Of course he knew he must meet her when

he accepted Mrs. McGregor's invitation to Bigley, and he had steeled himself against this interview—had thought it all out, how to meet her and so on—had indeed been looking out for her all the afternoon; yet now, face to face with her once more after six long years, his self-possession almost fails him. Almost, not quite. He so far forgets himself, however, as to stare blankly at her for a full second without seeing her outstretched palm.

“It's me,” says Cecilia softly. It is the sweetest, if the most ungrammatical little exclamation—and young, almost childish. Indeed, on poor Cecilia, the appearance of Stairs has had so strange, so strong an influence, that it has carried her back to the old days, when she was hardly out of her short frocks, or at all events, only just into her long ones.

Her colour has deepened. A soft light has sprung into her eyes.

“Phil! you remember me?” Her smile now is one of clear delight—open, frank. The idea of concealment of any sort is outside and beyond it altogether. She holds out both

her hands to him, with the palms upheld in the happiest way. That first nervousness has gone from her. It is as though it had never been. Here is her childhood's—her girlhood's friend. It would be absurd to say she has forgotten to think of who may be looking on as she holds out her hands to him, or of what they may be thinking, or how judging her. To her there is nothing to think about, save joy at the recovery of Phil; there is no thought of evil in her mind, of sin, or of regret. Everything seems blotted out in her save he, and the memory of the old sweet days, when he had been all the world to her, and she his universe.

Stairs has quite recovered himself now, and advances to her calmly, coldly, even though his heart is on fire. The very quick, open cordiality of her greeting has, more than all else, assured him of her indifference to him. She had never cared! What a fool! What a *fool* he had been!

He smiles pleasantly, takes both the little outstretched hands so daintily clad in their dove-grey suèdes, and presses them lightly.

"I remember," says he.

The words might have had significance, but for the extreme carelessness of the utterance. They sound unemotional—dead. Cecilia's soft smile fades, and with slow haste, if one may so describe it, she withdraws her hands. Mrs. Chance, who has an unpleasant trick of studying her neighbours' moods, retires behind her fan, and gives way to secret mirth.

"Sold," says she to herself softly. As has been said, she is very vulgar when *alone*.

Stairs murmurs a word or two to Cecilia (who answers him a little absently), then moves, passes through the group upon the terrace, and running down the grass steps, goes apparently towards the golfers.

When hidden from the view of those upon the terrace, however, he turns aside, and plunging into the wood, is lost to sight for the rest of this gay afternoon.

"How may a man in smart
Find matter to rejoice?"

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"How extremely good-looking," says Mrs.

Chance, leaning towards Cecilia, and purposely addressing her.

“Who? Captain Stairs?” asks Nell, breaking in quickly. Something about Cecilia strikes her as strange, and, without understanding it, this new mood of her sister’s has disturbed her; has given her a queer, unexplained feeling, that she ought to come to her help in some way. And Mrs. Chance’s eyes are so penetrating, so *very* blue. “Good-looking?”

“Handsome, rather.”

“Oh, do you think so? We usen’t to think him handsome, used we, Cissy? You remember, long ago? I was almost a baby then, and you — a betwixt and between. Handsome? But then he was like a brother to us, and one never thinks one’s brother handsome. That might account for it.”

“Except,” says Mrs. Chance sweetly, “that he,” she looks at Cecilia, as if speaking to her, “wasn’t your brother.”

“No, *like* one, I said.” Nell’s voice rings a little sharp.

“Yes. That was what she said,” says

Grant, who is again reclining at her feet. There is an air of protection in his tone.

"It doesn't matter what I said," says Nell supremely, speaking to him, though feeling a little annoyed with him for his support. "And I wish you would get up—you are sitting on my dress. I think, on the whole, you are about as tiresome a person as ever I met in my life."

"I hope you haven't met many," says Grant, whose temper as a rule is excellent. He looks amused.

"No," says Nell. She struggles with herself, and then gives way to laughter. "Anyway, you are the worst," says she, but so delightfully, and with such a half-merry, half-defiant glance from under her lids, as makes her sweeter than ever.

Grant has risen indeed at her command, but now he is leaning over her chair, whispering little nothings to her, and Mrs. Chance seeing him, and Nell's evident pleasure in his society, feels a sense of relief. If only she will fall in love with Alec, what a good thing for him—what a good thing for her—Bella!

"Oh, hang it! Here comes Nobbs," says McNamara suddenly, in a voice of horror, that is a little more Irish than usual.

"Then I'm going," says Nell.

"No, no. You shan't. You *can't*," says McNamara, seizing her skirt, and compelling her to reseal herself. "I'll hold you. Do you think we are going to be left to his tender mercies, without protection of *any* kind? Why, I believe you are the only person in the whole place who has been free from persecution from him. He hasn't fired one quotation at you yet."

"That's what frightens me! I feel he has been making up a regular fusillade for my benefit alone, and when it comes off——"

"Here he is!" says Mickey. "He's going for *us*! He's coming here! We ought to be prepared, you know. He's coming, primed and loaded; I know it by his air. Who's going to stand the first shot?"

"I don't mind his quotations," says Mrs. Chance disdainfully. It is a comfort to her to be able to disdain someone openly.

"You're a brave woman," says the Irish-

man. "I confess I always go down before them—riddled."

"Good gracious! what's the matter with his hair?" asks Cecilia, suddenly. She has quite recovered from her late excitement. That coldness of Stairs' has restored her to the old calm feeling—or she thinks it has.

"Now that you mention it," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss in a voice that comes from her boots—she wouldn't wear shoes for anything—"I think his hair is changed."

"It is certainly a very remarkable colour," says Nell.

"Nothing to what it was when *I* last saw it," says Mickey. "That's a year ago. It was then pea-green."

"Nonsense, Mickey."

"Fact, I assure you. It appears he had put on a trifle too much of the Infallible, and it came out like that. Dyes do sometimes, even in the best regulated families!"

Mrs. Chance is laughing.

"How did he explain it?"

"Gave out he had the cholera, and hid himself away in his bedroom for three weeks."

"Then how did you see him?" asks Nell severely.

"*In* the bedroom of course," airily. "Think anything would daunt me in the cause of science? I wanted to know how the dye had come out pea-green; but—would you believe it?—he refused to give me any information on the subject. Very low, *I* call it. But what can you expect of a man who sold a dog to a friend of mine, and——?"

"Well?"

"Well. He said it was an Irish terrier, but it turned out a Dachshund!"

"Oh, I really can't believe *that*, Mickey."

"You may, however."

"The friend, any way, had the best of the bargain," says Grant. "Dachshunds, if pure, are valuable."

"Yes, of course, that's why I say one can expect nothing from him. He's a perfect fool."

"Hush! he's here," says Grant.

"And a beauty he is!" says Mr. McNamara.

CHAPTER XI.

“He said, or right or wrong, what came into his head.”

HERE he is indeed, and perforce the conversation comes to an end.

Mr. Nobbs is a little man, spare and pale, but of exuberant spirits. He is perhaps the most universally detested person in this small place, being one of those dreadful people who can spring a quotation at you at any moment, be it prose or poetry. He lives in a tiny villa outside the town: “Bachelor Villa,” as he has coquettishly named it, and as yet, it has not crumbled into dust about his head, although many prayers have been uplifted to that effect. He walks on his toes, and has a most irritating way of turning his head to one side like a cock-robin when meaning to be specially charming. His handkerchiefs are always perfumed, and he has an abominable simpering way of boasting about his successes with the “fair sex,” (as he calls

them in his own amazing fashion), that enrages every man of his acquaintance. On the whole, however, he is a harmless little creature (though he would have apoplexy if you had told him so), but frightfully irritating.

He now advances on Mrs. Gaveston. She is Nell's sister, and therefore very near the rose. Nell is the latest importation, and therefore the most deserving of his attention. Besides, she is beautiful, and Mr. Nobbs, as he always says, "adores the beautiful in *any* shape." It is a little formula of his.

Coming to anchor before Mrs. Gaveston, he says, with the turn of his head that they all know so well, and that makes them so often desire to commit murder :

" 'Angel! ever bright and fair.' "

"Thank you, Mr. Nobbs," says Cecilia, breaking into a merry laugh, a laugh that is echoed by every one, to Mr. Nobbs' intense delight, who believes it arises from this latest betrayal of his wit. "But the original makes it 'Angels.' It is too good of you to make me the only recipient of your bounty."

"Ah, as for that," says Nobbs, bobbing and bowing, "you see I heard—I saw—that a replica of yours was here," he beams upon Nell, who, to her everlasting chagrin, dissolves into merriment behind her racket. She had so wanted to be dignified.

She has to come from behind it almost immediately, however. Her sister's voice reaches her.

"Nell! Mr. Nobbs wishes to be introduced to you. Mr. Nobbs—Miss Prendergast."

Nell bows gracefully. The little man bows back to her, and at once establishes himself at her side, to Grant's disgust.

At this moment Sir Stephen, against his better judgment, again appears upon the scene, coming up the grass step. He pauses as he gains the top, looking round him. For a seat, as Mrs. Cutforth-Boss thinks—for Nell, thinks Mrs. Chance. The latter beckons to him and ruffles her skirts a little to one side in a suggestive way.

"We can make room for you here," says she.

"No. I'd crush you—and I like standing," says Wortley. Still he goes towards her, and

would perhaps have taken the despised seat after all but for a word from Nell.

That disgraceful coquette leans forward.

"Sir Stephen, come here."

"There isn't room," says Grant to her in a low, reproachful tone.

"No, really," says Mrs. Chance. She makes another effort with her new and charming skirts, and beckons to Sir Stephen.

"I can give you a seat."

But Nell's eyes are on Sir Stephen's, and her lips are smiling. They are smiling all the more happily because she has taken Mrs. Chance's thoughts off Cecilia, who again is growing so silent, that people will perhaps be wondering—speculating! What *can* be the matter with Cissy?

"Come here!" says she, "I want a word with you—one word." Her face is delightful now. "Only a *little* one!"

Sir Stephen goes to her, stepping over the widow's trailing skirts as he does so, and Mrs. Chance's face grows dark.

"Well?" says Sir Stephen to Nell. He is evidently expecting the "word."

"I want," says Nell, turning her fair and fresh and lovely face up to his, "to know who is that *very* ugly girl down there."

"Good Heavens!" cried Mr. McNamara tragically, "are you so ignorant as that? Oh! come, I've got to post you up in your surroundings. Behold in me a map of your little Bigley-on-Sea. Why, that's your host's daughter. His own, and only one. She belongs to the class that we so often read of, but so seldom see—'The Heiress.'"

"She looks it," says Mrs. Chance drily.

"She seems a very good girl," says Nell, "and affectionate. I've noticed that she is going about with her mother all the day."

"That's fatal," says Mrs. Chance. "The daughter who stays at her mother's elbow all day, only stays there because she can't get anyone to stay at *her* elbow all day. It must be a perfect affliction to have a girl like that."

"I expect she'll have that affliction for some time," says Grant.

"But I understood," says Mrs. Chance, directing a smiling glance at Cecilia, who looks back at her unmoved, "that she is

hardly so forlorn as you think—that Captain Stairs is a little *épris* with her.”

“She has money,” said Mrs. Cutforth-Boss suddenly.

“But so has he,” says Grant. “And therefore what on earth would he marry a girl like that for?”

“‘Much desires more!’” quotes Mickey in his sprightliest manner. Really he is wonderful. He is always all there.

“Certainly she is very ugly,” says Nell, in a regretful tone. “But——”

“There isn’t a but,” says Mickey. “My good child, look at her *nose*!”

“And her eyes,” says Grant. “Gooseberries!”

“And her freckles.”

“Oh! I like freckles,” says Nell. “But her mouth—it is very big certainly.”

“It is, poor girl,” says Mickey. “You didn’t hear about her, did you, at their last party here, a year ago? No. It’s a pitiful tale. They had Aunt Sally at the end of the ground over there. And there were some strangers here, and poor Miss McGregor was standing a

few yards from the real Auntie, and unfortunately the strangers mistook the whole thing, and thought that *she* was Aunt Sally, and sent a shower of sticks at her. She didn't understand what it meant, poor thing, until one of the sticks hit her on the right eye!"

"Oh, now, Mickey, I can hardly believe——"

"I'm not surprised, I'm sure. She could hardly believe it herself. Such an insult. It hurt her very much, I can tell you—especially the eye."

"Te—he—he," says Mr. Nobbs, in his most aggravating simper. "One can see it. Her eye 'In a fine frenzy rolling.' Te—he—he!"

A ghastly silence greets this brilliant burst of wit. But Mrs. Chance breaks it.

"Do you know, Mr. Nobbs, you're *too* funny. You are, really. You oughtn't to spring your wit on people like that. It—well, it makes them feel—oh! *so* strange. When people are very clever and very well read, like you, they should remember that others——"

“Ah! now—come now—honestly you flatter me,” says Mr. Nobbs, his head *very* much on one side. “No, really you mustn’t. You ladies spoil me so. But

‘Woman! lovely woman! Nature made thee
To temper man; we had been brutes without you.’

This delicate compliment he conveys with uplifted voice and hands delicately gesticulating, whilst pirouetting softly on his toes.

Somebody repeats the word “brutes,” but this time in the singular. And Cecilia, leaning back in her chair, nearly goes into hysterics behind her fan.

Mr. McNamara is looking at him with the most rapt attention.

“Could you do it again, Nobbs?” asks he, in a low, breathless tone.

“Do——?”

“That little recitation?”

“Oh! Really! ’Pon my word! a mere passing thought, you know, impelled to the surface by all the fairness round me; I——”

“We are to have a penny reading next week,” says McNamara. “If you would

kindly"—here he pauses, checked by a vigorous and, it must be confessed, excessively painful kick from Grant, but he goes on nobly, nevertheless—"consent——"

"Mr. McNamara!" cries Mrs. Chance quickly, "my glove—*See*."

It has indeed fallen over the terrace on which they are seated to the one below.

"I see it," says McNamara calmly. "There are no lions here to-day, so I need not jump, I think. I'll get it for you presently. What I was saying, my dear Nobbs, was, that if you would kindly consent to favour us with one of your magnificent recitations, of which——"

Here Sir Stephen drops a lace antimacassar lightly over his head, but *through* it Mr. McNamara—proving thus his indomitable spirit—speaks with all his native dignity.

"—Of which we all have heard so much, you would bestow upon us an inestimable benefit. Mrs. Gaveston, who is one of our most esteemed patronesses, will, I am sure, add her entreaties to mine."

He here so far emerges from the anti-

macassar, as to catch Cecilia's eye, upon whom he confers a wink, mild but firm. It is impossible to retreat, so Cecilia murmurs something or other that might be taken for anything in the world.

It is taken with effusion by Mr. Nobbs. Delighted, he was sure—nay, too pleased. Any *little* efforts of his—the “little” so accentuated as to leave it open that it should be “great”—were always at the disposal of “Te—he—he, ‘A thing of beauty, and a joy for ever.’”

“I'd love to kick him,” says Grant, *sotto voce* to his cousin, Sir Stephen.

“Poor little brute! You'd kill him,” says Sir Stephen contemptuously.

“A good thing too,” says Grant.

“Where's Captain Stairs?” asks Nobbs presently. “I heard he was here. I quite recollect meeting him some years ago.”

“He's gone for a prow!” says Mrs. Chance.

“Indeed? Where? In what direction, may I ask?”

“You *may*,” says McNamara, with avidity.

"Do you see those trees over there? He went right down to that tent." He is pointing, I regret to say, in the very direction that Stairs has *not* taken.

"I think I'll go after him."

"Do. He'll be delighted," says McNamara warmly.

"What on earth did you ask him to take part in the penny readings for?" asks Cecilia indignantly, when he is gone.

"Why shouldn't I? There was no buffoon engaged as far as I could hear."

"Except you, Mickey," says Sir Stephen, whereon Mickey throws things at him.

Nell is looking meditative.

"It must be dreadful to be as ugly as Mr. Nobbs," says she, at last. Her glance unfortunately turns to Cecilia, as though addressing the remark to her—to Cecilia, who so seldom thinks, and who to-day is a little more outside herself than ever. She laughs back at her sister.

"He's even uglier than Peter!" says she gaily. Her mind has been running on Peter for the last hour—ever since the memory of

her betrothal and marriage to him had been brought back to her with such cruel force. As the words pass her lips, however, they frighten her a little—a very little! Who has heard her? She glances quickly round. Only Nell, who is looking a little sad—for her—and Mrs. Chance. “Oh!” cries she, with a sudden touch of contrition, but still, in spite of all, with an irrepressible laugh. “*Poor* old Peter!”

“I don’t think Peter ugly,” says Nell, with a little thoughtful frown, as if considering Peter, bringing him up before her mental vision, and judiciously putting him upon trial.

“Of course not,” says Peter’s wife. “I merely called him ugly——”

“As a term of endearment!” suggests Mrs. Chance, with her perpetual smile, that has so often a touch of venom in it.

“Perhaps,” says Cecilia, looking at her. The pretty girlish face is almost unreadable now. It has put on a mask—a very calm and thoughtful one.

“Used you to call *your* husband ugly?” asks she sweetly.

Mrs. Chance changes colour. The late owner of the charming widow had, indeed, been excessively ugly, not only in all his works and in all his ways, but in his appearance besides. Cecilia's little dart had gone home.

"Your sense of humour seems deficient," says Mrs. Chance, with ill-suppressed anger. "I meant nothing but a mere jest."

"A mere—*ugly*—jest?"

"Another quip," says Mrs. Chance. She is trying to smile pleasantly, but she is very pale. Her footing in the society round her is very insecure, and to quarrel with the wife of Peter Gaveston would be to give herself away a good deal. Yet to refrain, to hold back, to lower a weapon before Cecilia Gaveston or her sister seems more than her strength is equal to.

"Oh! a quip, of course," says Nell, breaking into the moment very eagerly if quietly. Surely things have gone far enough? And why is Cecilia so foolish, so silly, as to quarrel with this woman, who seems to her, Nell, such a horrid person, and so full of

queer little ways? "And besides, when one loves a person, one never thinks him ugly."

"And when one doesn't?" says Mrs. Chance, always smiling.

"Oh! then, of course, the defects stand clear."

Mrs. Chance nods lightly at Cecilia. There is consummate impertinence in the nod.

"I think it was *you* who suggested Mr. Gaveston was ugly," says she.

Cecilia looks calmly back at her. She is young, frivolous—in many ways wanting, but just now she rises so far above her usual indolence, as to let her spirit over-ride that of the woman who has been so studiously rude to her. She looks with a little wrinkled brow of disdain at Mrs. Chance for a moment or two, then tilts back her chair so far that her pretty silk open-work stockings and high-heeled shoes can be seen. McNamara is just behind her. She nods to him, and he bends down to her.

"What a *very* vulgar person!" says she, in a whisper indeed, but one distinctly audible to—Mrs. Chance.

CHAPTER XII.

“ Bees hum all day amid the young spring leaves,
The rooks caw loud from every elm-tree bough,
The sparrows twitter in the old church eaves—
But no voice cries for me or calls me now.”

To round the cliffs, and start for a long swift walk across the sandy soil to-day, is to be happy. The sea is a bright blue, with delicate little flounces of white swaying up and down upon it ; now here, now there, and from rock to rock, the pale grey gulls are flying. Sometimes the ever-changing sea is grey, and sometimes green, but to-day it is blue—blue as the deepest sapphire, and brilliant as the diamond.

It glitters and glances in the sun-rays, the small, soft flecks of foam that ride on the bosom of every wave, making the glorious colour of it even more glorious. And up here on the top of the overhanging cliff, it is all colour too. Such a splendid blending. Here a blaze of yellow from the lesser St.

John's Wort, and there the soft pink fleecy sweetness of the sea-clover, and beyond the gold of the tiny potentilla—and everywhere, mingled with these, deeper tinges still of red and white and blue, and as a background the faint lilac of the pretty ling. Truly, as sings Mr. Bridges, one of the sweetest of our later day poets :—

“The cliff-top has a carpet
Of lilac, gold, and green,
The blue sky bounds the ocean,
The white clouds scud between.

* * * * *

“A flock of gulls are wheeling
And wailing round my seat;
Above my head the heaven,
The sea beneath my feet.”

Philip Stairs sitting on a chair of Nature's hewing, up here on this bold cliff, has little of heaven in his heart. Yesterday he had seen her for the first time after all these long six years. And all last night he had walked up and down his room, cursing her bitterly with each fresh pipe.

When first he heard of her marriage—when the news he would not believe at first,

but later he was compelled to acknowledge—had come to him in Burmah, it had finished at once the last touches of boyhood in him. It laid bare to him the cruelty of life. The cruelty to *her*! For in his soul he had still held her true; coerced and driven and compelled by a scheming mother—but at heart the tender loving girl that he had known.

This thought, this secret belief helped him to live. It was too late for succour, for interference of any kind, but the memory of his pretty sweetheart dwelt with him always, saddening him, adding many years to him that he had not actually lived, but without hardening him. He grew less lighthearted is is true, but more earnest; and with a passionate desire to fill the void in his heart he flung himself into his work, and had already distinguished himself in many ways, and gained the friendship and respect of his colonel, when sickness struck him down, and after a terrible struggle with death he had pulled through sufficiently to be invalided home.

All the long voyage was filled with the

thought that soon, somewhere, he should see once again the beloved, the unforgotten face. He did not fear to see it. He had told himself lately that the old delight was over. Had passed as a dream in the night ; that he could meet her fairly, as the wife of *another* man, and greet her as a friend only.

And yesterday he had seen her, had looked into her eyes, noted the fairness of her, the sweetness, the unsurpassable charm, and knew that the old mad love was still alive, and deep, deeper than ever. He knew, too, as he touched her hand, and met her smiling, careless welcome, that all his fond belief in her was dead.

She had not been coerced by her mother ! She had seen the advantage of money, young as she was. He had not touched her heart at all in those poor dead days, when *his* heart had been touched to its death. She was frivolous only, a poor beautiful thing, and unworthy.

Rising, he goes slowly across the dry and sandy plain, to where a dark wood shows upon his left. A longing for cool shadows and dense places has come upon him. The

glare here is terrible, searching his very soul as it were. It is impossible to feel in this vast brilliance—brilliance of sea and sky.

If he could only blot out yesterday. In spite of himself he dwells upon it, and that tries him. It is hideous to dwell upon the ruin of an idol, it leaves so little behind. Sometimes absolutely nothing. He would so gladly have drawn a sponge over the memory of Cecilia's smiling face, her outstretched welcoming hands.

But for yesterday, he might have gone on his way contented in a measure, and not knowing. But now it is clear to him. The old horrible pain is still here, the pain that rendered his nights sleepless, and his days interminable, six months ago.

He has seen her, and found her wanting—*there* lies the stab. Found her, more beautiful than ever, and steeped in worldliness. He had dreamed of her as sad, forlorn, and found her joyous, lovely, the very incarnation of idle content.

He is close to the wood now, and the dull, soft moan of the ocean is growing fainter

He has reached, indeed, the first tree, the outpost of the innumerable host behind, when the sound of a merry laugh reaches his ears. A breathless happy laugh, as of one running. It is clear and sweet.

He stands quite still for a moment, as if listening. It is hers!

A second later an echo of it comes to him—that laugh again, so like, yet so unlike. A child's laugh this time, also a little breathless, as if the owner of it is running for dear life. All at once it becomes quite plain to him. Her child. *Hers!* His heart almost stops beating. He had not thought of that!

Turning, he would have gone back to the glare and the cold loneliness of the sea, but just at this moment the voices sound clearer. Nearer. Drawing his breath quickly, he waits. The bushes are pushed frantically aside, and into the open, and straight up to him, runs a child.

Such a beautiful creature, with Cecilia's hair and brow, and Cecilia's laughing mouth, but not Cecilia's eyes.

The boy, with all a happy child's belief in

the goodness of every one, rushes to Stairs, precipitates himself into his arms.

"She's coming! She's coming! *Save me!*" shrieks he frantically, with a realism hardly to be surpassed. He has made up his mind indeed, that red Indians are pursuing him with a view to taking his scalp, and even as he clings to Stairs, he looks, not at him, but backwards over his shoulder to where "the slaughterer" may soon be expected to appear. He has no thought for anything but the dreaded enemy.

He is rudely awakened from his exciting dreaming. Stairs has deliberately thrust him from him; not brutally or violently, but with a decision that has hatred in it; and the boy with childhood's quick perception of something wrong, turns, tottering a little from the push, and looks up at Stairs amazed. In all his short happy life, no one had ever rebuffed him before. No one had ever given him anything but fondling words and open arms. To the boy it is a revelation.

"Hah!" cries a merry, panting voice.
"*Now I've got you!*"

CHAPTER XIII.

“Unto thee was I looking for the light and the glory of life,
And the Gods’ doors shut behind me till the day of the uttermost strife,
And now thou hast taken my soul, thou wilt cast it into the night,
And cover thine head from the darkness, and turn thine eyes from the light.”

It is Cecilia, with her eyes aglow, and her cheeks flushed, and her hair distinctly riotous. All sorts of little lovelocks are flying across her low broad brow. The run has wakened every pulse, and set her blood a-going. As she rushes out from the dark behind her, she looks a mere girl—a girl of seventeen once more. Age—baffled—has drawn behind her. To Stairs, it is the old Cecilia! *His* Cecilia! In all her moods and stages at once. The child, the romp, the lovely girl! It was like that she looked—that day—the week before he left—that day when she burst through the

rhododendrons and cried "*Pouf*" to him in her little saucy way. Did she remember? *Could* she?

All at once Cecilia sees him. The happy rush forward is completely stopped. And where is the laugh? the jest? The smile is dead, the colour has faded! Where is the old Cecilia now?

A sickening pallor overspreads her face for a moment; a moment only. But it tells its tale. Stairs' heart is beating rapidly. After all—*does* she care?

His heart is beating, and with such thoughts. He thrusts them from him. Had he wished her unhappy? Has he wronged her? What does it all mean?

He had not noticed that first swift agitation of hers yesterday, the awakening as it really was of a soul within her; the gaiety only of her manner he had noticed—but where is that gaiety now?

Cecilia by this time has recovered herself. Her face is still pale, but the strangeness, the something that is almost fear, has gone from it. She is quite calm again, quite her idle,

charming self. She is even wondering lazily why it is that these two meetings with Phil Stairs should have been accompanied by that dull feeling of faintness. Perhaps he has brought back recollections of the life she led with her mother, just before her engagement to Peter—such wretched days! That is it, no doubt.

“Is that you, Philip?” says she prettily, but indifferently. She remembers his reception of her yesterday, when she had meant to show cordiality to an old friend. “How strange to meet you here. Do you know you quite startled me? You seem,” looking at Geoffrey, who has drawn close to her, and who is glancing with undisguised dislike at Stairs, “to have startled my little son too.”

“Your son,” says Stairs. “*Yours!*” His eyes are fixed on hers.

“I think so,” says Cecilia, smiling. She draws Geoffrey to her with one hand and presses his shapely, close-cropped, shining head against her heart. “Eh, Geoff?”

Geoffrey, for answer, clasps his arms around her slender waist.

"You see," says she, laughing, "he has taken possession of me."

"I see!" coldly.

A short pause.

"What's the matter with you?" asks Cecilia suddenly. "How changed you are. You used to be—well——" pausing.

"Well?" grimly.

"One of the nicest people in the world," says Mrs. Gaveston, without hesitation, and with a second smile more brilliant than her last. "At least I know *I* used to think so. But what has happened to you? I know India is a very hot place—has it dried you up beyond recognition? And in six years only."

"Six years is a long time," says Stairs, who is wondering at her. What does she mean? Has she *any* meaning? Was there any real feeling in that pallor of five minutes ago?

"Long," she pauses, and a faint light comes into her eyes—a light that gives him the impression that she is looking backwards.

He studies that look attentively.

"Yes, yes," says she, sighing—not through any sort of misery, but as though the un-

usual act of thinking has wearied her. "Certainly, it is a long time, but after all it isn't a lifetime."

"Sometimes it is."

"Of course, if one dies at that happy age, but," with a quick, almost hungry glance at her child, "one so *seldom* does. Six years have changed *you*, however—wonderfully."

"And what have they done to you?"

"Nothing!" She makes a little exquisite gesture with her arms as if appealing to him.

"Now what *have* they done—eh?"

Truly they have done nothing but enrich each charm she had. Standing as she now is, with her arms thrown towards him in an amused appeal, and her lovely face alight with laughter, and the handsome child clinging to her, she seems the very embodiment of beauty.

At this moment Geoffrey tightens his arms round her in fun, and, bending, she catches him and undoes his clasping fingers.

"Are you a bear, you naughty fellow, that you hug me so? Come, come, Captain Stairs is looking surprised at you."

"I don't care what he looks," says the boy distinctly, his dark, velvety eyes staring straight at Stairs, who looks back at him with a terrible melancholy in his gaze.

"You must forgive him," says Cecilia prettily to Stairs. "He is dreadfully, dreadfully naughty sometimes; but when all is told, he's a *heart*! We are having a gipsy tea in the wood," pointing behind her, "and as you are so near, I hope you will join us. Nobody at all but ourselves, and Mickey McNamara, who is staying with us."

"I am sorry," begins Stairs, "I have to go——"

"With me?" suggests Cecilia, with a faint grimace that brings back all the past to him with a terrible vitality. "Then it's settled. Geoffrey, tell Captain Stairs he must come and have tea with us." To her intense surprise, Geoffrey, who as a rule, is the most genial of children, refuses to say anything. He stands silent, but observant, with that queer side-long look of extreme youth directed at Stairs. Plainly he is measuring him; and hapless is the one that comes short under childhood's rule.

But Stairs is thinking only of that faint, saucy grimace of Cecilia's. He does not even notice the child's open, if silent rudeness. Cecilia, however, rushes into the breach.

"You won't mind? You will come?"

"Mind?" There is such utter ignorance in his voice that Cecilia sees it is unnecessary to explain. Perhaps he had not heard.

"You will come then!"

"Thank you. Yes."

"We must hurry," cries Cecilia gaily.
"They will be wondering where we are."



CHAPTER XIV.

“The bitter sweet, the honey blent with gall,
Eros and Anteros, for weal or woe,
Him the destroyer, him the saviour call.”

STAIRS has followed her obediently through the wood, she showing the way, the boy with her. He hardly knows why he is going, so strong had been his determination a while ago not to accompany her anywhere.

“We are nearly there now,” cries she, suddenly turning to Stairs. “I can smell the fire already; don’t you? I’m sure Mickey has been putting in green leaves and branches, but it smells very lovely, doesn’t it?—the lovelier for that—only I’m afraid it won’t boil the kettle. Ah! Here we are!”

All at once she seems to step from the soft shady wood into a small, clear opening, where three people are to be seen, bending over something or other, the deepest anxiety

depicted in all their attitudes. From between them a small thread of smoke ascends, very reluctantly, to Heaven.

“A sacrificial fire,” says Stairs, with a sort of gloomy mirth. They all indeed look as earnest, as intent, as if their lives are in question.

“They are making sacrifices, certainly,” says Cecilia laughing. “How their poor eyes must suffer! I felt I should be of no use in a case like this, so I ran a race with Geoff. I’d hate to sacrifice myself for anything.”

The words are spoken gaily, jestingly, but they give Stairs pause. Is that the very truth? Had he been right after all? *Is she worthless—soulless?*

His eyes travel back to the fire. The three stooping over it have their faces hidden from him, but as he moves nearer he sees their figures more plainly, and places them in a sort of mirthless mirth. That big-shouldered man is the High Priest, and that slender maiden the vestal virgin——Good Heavens! that must be the Devil!

It is, however, only Mickey McNamara after all, with his face as black as a coal! He has raised his head on hearing the coming footsteps, and now presents a visage that would have routed a regiment of Zulus.

“Good Heavens, Mickey!” cries Cecilia.

At this the other two rise, and glance backwards towards her. Nell, seeing a man, instinctively pulls down her cuffs, and makes little soft dabs at her hair. She is slightly flushed. Cecilia, who is aghast at Mickey's appearance, stands still and points tragically at him, on which Gaveston and Nell look at him too.

“What's the matter with me?” asks Mr. McNamara, lifting his hands to his face, which plainly is the point in question—they are all staring at it. Slowly he rubs his hands over it, after which proceeding nothing is left to be desired.

They all burst out laughing; Geoffrey has flung himself on the grass in a very agony of mirth.

“Oh, he *is* dirty, isn't he?” says Nell, shaking with laughter, upon which McNamara,

casting a reproachful glance at her, wheels round and dashes towards a pool in the distance.

“Peter,” says Mrs. Gaveston, advancing, “I have an old friend to introduce to you.”

The big man whom Stairs had called the High Priest, turns at this, and with a smile still on his face as he remembers the flying of Mickey, comes forward. Stairs colours hotly So this is her husband. This tall, ugly, kindly, *perfect* gentleman? There is no taking Gaveston at any time to be less than that, and Stairs at once acknowledges it, with a singularly painful pang.

“This is my husband,” says Cecilia prettily, and with the most buoyant smile. There is evidently no suspicion in her mind about anyone. *She* is happy, so every one must be happy too. She has played at happiness for six long years, and has quite come to believe in it. Is there anything beyond her present life? Her delightful life in which she is accustomed to be petted and spoiled. Has she a single trouble? Well—there’s a debt or two to be paid to her dress-woman, to be

sure, and a few ridiculous principles on Peter's part to be overcome, but beyond that—beyond that the waves sink and all the lake seems clear!

Gaveston has come to her at once, his clear dark eyes smiling at Cecilia's visitor.

"A friend of yours?" says he, and extends his hand to Stairs, who takes it, presses it, drops it.

A strange turn of affairs truly, he tells himself with some bitterness, when he has taken, and pressed, the hand of Cecilia's husband!

"An old friend! such an old one," says Cecilia vivaciously. "Nell, you remember Philip?" At this the vestal virgin comes forward.

"Indeed I do!" says she pleasantly, slipping her hand into Stairs' in an outburst of friendliness. "I was only a baby then and Cissy was a child—but we both remember you, don't we, Cissy?"

"Of course we do," says Cecilia delightfully. "Phil quite brings back the old days, doesn't he? What a pickle you were then, Nell."

Stairs' face has blanched. It is nothing to her then all this past—"a dream and a forgetting, no more." "It brings back old days." Stairs turns, and for once, for the first time perhaps in all his acquaintance with her, deliberately examines her. What a face! What lips—half mocking—wholly delightful—and her eyes—

"Her eyes men Beauty call,"

and her brow, with those little sunny ringlets running across it—and yet with all these charms, these exquisite delights, what is she? A mere bubble on life's ocean, a thing with nothing in it, a glorious phantasy, a passing sunbeam, a woman perfect at all points so far as eye can see, yet for all that,

"Light as the foam that flecks the seas,
Fitful as summer's sunset breeze,
As transient as morning dew,
Mere waste of time."

"I remember you, too," says Stairs with an effort, turning from Cecilia and looking down into Nell's pretty face. "Six years is a long time, of course, but I remember."

Again his eyes seek Cecilia's. At this moment it seems to him that he would give his life to be able to *compel* her to feel, to remember, as he does. Cecilia laughs, and beneath the laugh—which is perfect—the faint blanching of her face goes unseen.

“I hope you will come and stay with us, when your visit with the McGregors is up,” says Gaveston, in his calm, kindly tones. “Any friend of my wife’s,” with a tender glance at Cecilia, who nods back at him in quite a brilliant fashion, “is a friend of mine. It appears you knew her when you were both even younger,”—with an amused glance at his wife, who indeed looks a mere girl, “than you are now.”

“I met Mrs. Gaveston six years ago,” says Stairs briefly.

“And were tremendous chums?”

Peter laughs, and his wife laughs too, and pats him on the shoulder with quite delightful *bonhomie*. The pat drives Stairs nearly mad.

“Yes, yes, you must come,” says she. “It will be lovely to renew our acquaintance. Peter is right, we *were* chums. Do

you remember that last dance we were at?" —she smiles openly at Stairs—"that fancy ball given by Lady Adean? That was almost the last time I saw you before you went abroad, or was it the very last? I can always call it to mind, because it was my first dance; I feel a little ashamed now when I recollect how I danced that night, and wore holes in my stockings. Peter, you'd have shuddered if you had seen me! I never sat down for one moment!"

"I shouldn't," says Gaveston. "I know you. I should shudder if you *did* sit down for a moment; I should imagine you were at the point of death."

"Oh! what a shame!" says Cecilia, giving him a little push that wouldn't have upset a fly.

Stairs, dumb, is watching her. Is it actual cruelty or only mere indifference? That last dance! And she—and he—and that too swift hour in the conservatory. He had not *asked* her to marry him—he had not put her to the proof, but if ever a girl knew what he meant, Cecilia knew then.

He was poor, absolutely penniless but for his pay, and had nothing to offer her. But his eyes—his voice—she *must* have understood. And at the last—when he had taken her in his arms, and kissed her mouth—the mouth had been upheld to him, and sweetly willing. . . . A childish mouth, indeed, yet not so childish but that its lovely owner must have known the passionate love he bore her.

It all comes back—the soft silence of the night, the faint dropping of the fountain, the distant snatches of the waltz in the ball-room that seemed so far away. The girl standing with her hand fast locked in his. His desperate, honourable determination not to bind her—not to speak. He had kissed her, once—that seemed speech enough, if she would be true; and he had believed she would be that. She knew, he felt she knew, how much he loved her, and she would wait, and soon he would come back covered with glory, and they—they two—What a boy's dream it all was!

He had come back to find all things forgotten, and Cecilia—married.

These thoughts pass in a second; he returns to the present moment, to the sound of her voice.

"You mustn't mind Peter," Cecilia is saying gaily. "And you must come and stay with us."

"I am afraid——" begins Stairs coldly.

"I really hope you will," says Gaveston hospitably, whose star is hardly in the ascendant at this moment; the Fates, urging him on to this invitation, are playing him a sorry game. "I hear you have no very immediate friends to demand your time. Cecilia has been telling me about you. So I hope you will spare us a little of it."

Stairs hesitates. This man, so kind, so trusting, so ignorant! No, he will not accept his—— And yet why not? She cares nothing—and to be near her, to see her every day!

"Thank you," says he, "you are very kind. I shall be delighted."

"Then you will be in time for another fancy ball," says Nell, "because Cecilia——"

Here Mr. McNamara, very rosy about

the face and ears, and with a generally scrubbed appearance, comes from behind a tree.

“There’s somebody ‘comin’ through the rye,” says he, pointing through the trees to a field beyond.

“So there is ; who can it be ?” says Nell.

“Why, it’s Sir Stephen !” cries Cecilia.
“Tell him to come and have tea with us.”

Mr. McNamara, snatching up a cup, rushes forward.



CHAPTER XV.

“ Yet weep I not for human misery,
Nor for the stars’ complaining,
Nor for the river’s wailing.
I weep for thee alone most miserly,
Keep all my tears for thee.”

“Hi!” roars he to a tall young man, who has come out of the field, and is now striding through the bracken, with his gun on his shoulder.

The tall young man stops, and looks enquiringly in his direction, whereupon McNamara, waving the cup on high, yells to him :

“I say, Wortley!”

“What?” roars back Sir Stephen, who, on account of the dip in the ground where he is standing, can see McNamara only.

“ ‘Lads and lasses, come to tay—come to tay,’ ” sings Mickey at the top of his extraordinary lungs.

Sir Stephen, who naturally thinks he has gone mad, shouts back :

“What the deuce are you at?”

At this juncture, Nell most providentially appears upon the scene, another cup in her hand, which she also waves to the rabbiter down below.

“I really think, Mickey, you might spare us your Irish *sometimes*,” says she pettishly, to McNamara, who indignantly repudiates the accusation.

“Irish, indeed! I was only making up poetry. If I had said, ‘Lads and lasses, come away,’ he’d have gone round the corner; but when I said ‘*tay*’ he understood.”

“Did he?” contemptuously.

“Of course he did. He’s coming; I suppose,” wrathfully, and growing very mixed, because of his anger, “*you* thought I called *tay* tea.”

“No,” says Nell, giving way to wild mirth. “I thought you called tea *tay*!”

“Look here,” says Mickey, “I’ll strangle you some day.” He, however, is also shouting with laughter by the time Sir Stephen joins them.

"Such a blessing you have come," says Nell, giving him her hand, and a delightful smile, "Mickey was just going to strangle me."

"Well, I thought he looked a little mad," says Sir Stephen. "I'm thankful I'm in time. Put down that murderous weapon, McNamara," pointing to the cup, "and explain yourself."

"I'm bad at that," says Mickey, "but Mrs. Gaveston is having a gipsy tea over there, and she wants to know if you'll join us."

"How nicely you said that, just like one of those etiquette books, that tell you how to address your superiors," says Nell, with a faint little grimace, which, I regret to say, Mr. McNamara lavishly responds to behind Sir Stephen's back. "Sir Stephen, aren't you tired of the rabbits? I am sure the rabbits are very tired of you. Do let them alone for a little while, and come and talk to Cecilia."

"Does that mean that I mustn't talk to you?" asks Sir Stephen, who is really

looking almost handsome in his present get-up.

Nell lowers her head and furrows her brows as if thinking.

"I'm so busy, you see," says she demurely. "I'm looking after the tea. But you've come in excellent time for that, as the fire has refused to light."

The fire, however, is now a glorious thing as they approach. It is blazing high, and the kettle — that, oft-times, most obstinate thing in the world, is singing with all the fervour of a prima donna.

"Oh, Sir Stephen, here you are!" says Cecilia, going to meet him. "We have had such a tussle with the fire, but now I really *do* think it is going to behave itself. One would think an evil eye had been thrown on it until now."

"It must be Captain Stairs'," says Nell laughing. "He is new; an unknown quantity; therefore how can we trust him?"

"It is madness to take anyone on trust," returns Stairs smiling. He is thinking of Cecilia, however.

"We'll take *you* anyway," says Mickey. "Your eye seems to be a most respectable one, if it has had anything to do with *this* fire."

Indeed, the kettle is at last boiling, and after a desperate struggle with the teapot, to which it appears to be hopelessly antagonistic, and a snort of rage that only itself could produce, is persuaded to pour itself into the triumphant pot, after which the lid of the latter closes with a disgracefully jubilant sound, and peace is restored—though without much honour on either side, it must be acknowledged.

"We were just talking about our fancy ball," says Nell presently. Then, to Wortley, "Cecilia is going to have one next month. What will *you* be?"

"Perhaps I shan't be asked," says Sir Stephen.

"Nonsense! That's getting out of it. *I* know what you ought to be."

"Do you? What then?"

"I'd be afraid to tell you."

There is so little fear in the small face

looking down at him — Sir Stephen is stretched at her feet—that the latter laughs aloud.

“You can’t think how interesting you are,” says he. “It’s so nice to know someone is afraid of one. It quite sets one up. But what have I done to you, that you should commend to my notice such a costume as that?”

“As what?” asks she, glancing at him from under her long lashes.

“As the one you have in your mind. Of course, I shall follow your advice; and perhaps the cheapest way to manage it would be to write to Mr. Irving. He must have a considerable number of those costumes tucked away somewhere.”

“Is it Greek?” asks Nell, with a puzzled air. Her audacity is enchanting. Sir Stephen laughs again.

“No; it’s melancholy English. Melancholy for me, at all events! proving your opinion of me. But tell me—*shall* I send to the Lyceum for some of those cast-off garments that splendid Mephistopheles used to wear?”

“Oh! is it *that* you have in your mind?” cries she disdainfully. “As if,” with another little glance, “they would fit you. He, so tall and slender, you so tall and——”

“Broad?”

“I wasn’t going to say that,” says Nell frowning. But—as if suddenly becoming aware of something—“you *are* the biggest man I ever saw.”

“Is that an insult or a compliment? Perhaps I had better pass it over. You call me a giant then?”

“I don’t call you anything,” says Nell.

“You do, however. ‘Sir Stephen,’ sometimes.”

“I meant that I didn’t call you names.”

“I’m not so sure of that.” He edges towards her across the grass, and helps himself to a bit of plum cake. Tea is in high swing by this time. “You’ve called me a ‘giant’! And to call anybody anything is actionable now-a days. Well, am I to go as ‘Anak’ then, if not as Mephistopheles?”

“Ah! That’s trying to find out,” says she. “I wasn’t thinking of either Anak or

that other unpleasant person when I first spoke."

"Weren't you?" says Mr. McNamara, breaking into the conversation with a sigh of relief. "What a comfort! The infant phenomenon is always such a nuisance! When *I* first spoke, I——"

"Oh, *spare* us, Mickey," cries Cecilia.

"I wasn't going to say anything unpleasant," says McNamara reproachfully. "I was only going to reveal an old legend in the family. My mother and my old nurse, who was quite famed in Donegal for her knowledge of the unseen—who might, indeed, at this moment be a celebrated member of the Psychical Research Society——"

"Why isn't she? Where is she?" interrupts Cecilia anxiously. "Why don't you bring her over? What a find she'd be. She might make her fortune and ours, now Madame Blavatsky is gone."

"For one trifling reason. That she is gone too," says McNamara mournfully. "She died when I was two years old, and my mother always said a great woman had been lost to

the world. Especially the infant world. Anyhow, she had great hopes of me upon my first utterance."

"And what was that?" eagerly.

"Really I hardly like to tell." McNamara looks modestly into his cup.

"Oh, go on, Mickey."

"Well—it was 'Bo'!"

"Oh, go to the deuce," says Sir Stephen, forgetting himself in the heat and disappointment of the moment.

"I thought you said your old nurse knew something about the unseen—was quite a Mahatma sort of person?" says Cecilia, who never troubles herself to know anything about anything, and is quite content with smatterings.

"She never wore a hat that *I* ever heard of," says Mickey sadly. "She only wore a cap, that, as a child, I thought was a helmet, and she knew a lot about the unseen, so you needn't abuse the poor old thing. The dead are sacred, you know. Only *she* called the unseen 'The good people,' and when I said 'Bo,' evidently derived from Bogey: See? as

my first word, she told my mother it was the most remarkable instance of childish intelligence she had ever heard of. And that by reason of that one word, I should always be able to have the good people under my thumb. She said I was to be a leader of men, and that the 'good people' would obey me, and that I should marry a 'lovely lady.' " He pauses, and casts a thoughtful glance at Nell. "That's you, I suppose," says he.

"I'm sure it isn't then," says Nell heartily. "Your 'good people' have made a mistake there." She turns her back upon him, and gives her attention once more to Wortley.

"After all, you haven't guessed what I think you ought to be."

"I shall, perhaps."

"Oh! perhaps."

"You won't tell me then?"

"No!" shaking her charming head.

"Very good. I shall appear at your sister's dance in the dress you have—designed for me."

"You couldn't guess it," says she laughing.

"I'll try."

“What shall I go as?” asks Mr. McNamara generally, who, having eaten all the plum cake, is now, as he would have expressed it, “topping up” with the sponge. “I lie awake o’ nights dwelling on it.”

“My dear Mickey, what a woeful waste of time,” says Nell. “Is there a question about it? Why, you rehearsed the part, publicly, only ten minutes ago.”

“Oh, of course,” cries Cecilia, breaking into merry laughter. “A sweep, Mickey—a sweep you’ll have to be.”

“Oh, yes, Mickey. It will be delightful. The very thing for you!” declares Nell enthusiastically. “You could carry it off so well.”

Mr. McNamara fixes a baleful eye first on Cecilia, then on Nell, but answer makes he none! At last he turns to Peter.

“Rude! very rude *I* call it,” says he.

“Rude?” cries Nell. “What a misconception of the whole thing. Why, we want you to be original, that first and greatest thing. Many would shrink from the part, but you—with your bold spirit! You will

make a sensation—create a part. What can you desire more? And besides all that, you have *rehearsed* it—a chance given to few of us—you have *seen* yourself in the pool over there, and——”

“Like Narcissus, thought myself a beauty,” says McNamara promptly. “I did not, however, throw myself in. I reflected,” pensively, “that though I *was* a beauty, and therefore drownings and things might be expected of me, that still it wasn’t fair to all of you who would miss me so dreadfully.”

“How well you know us,” says Wortley.

Here Cecilia, who has been talking to Stairs, turns to them, with faintly flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

“Still arranging your costumes? Ah! you shouldn’t tell.”

“That’s what *I* say,” says Nell.

“Yet you have been endeavouring to dress me for the past half-hour,” says Wortley.

“My *dear* Miss Prendergast!” says McNamara, *sotto voce*, in the exact voice of Mrs. Cutforth-Boss.

“I shan’t tell what *I’m* going to be till I

have to," says Mrs. Gaveston. "And you, Peter—I forbid you to tell either."

"A royal command," says Gaveston in his quiet way.

"I've got my commands," says Mickey, turning to Cecilia. "They don't *sound* very royal. And I only hope when I appear in your rooms you will put the blame in the right quarter."

"Why? What is it? What does he mean?" says Cecilia, a little absently. "No, no *sweeps*, Mickey! Are you really going, Philip? Well, good-bye, and remember you are promised to me after your visit to the McGregors."

"I never forget," says Stairs.

He bids them all good-bye, amidst the happy confusion of their packing up, and disappears through the trees.

His departure, even to himself, seems a little abrupt. And he hardly knew why he went. Cecilia, for the past five minutes, had given herself up to him solely. She had been charming, delightful—*friendly*.

Perhaps that was why he went.

"Do you know," says Nell, addressing everyone generally, when he is well out of sight, "I think he is very nice indeed. I *do*, although certainly he is depressing. But, poor fellow, he was invalided home, and no doubt is still very ill."

"Decent fellow enough, in my opinion," says Mickey.

"I think," remarks Wortley, looking at Nell, "you sounded the central note when you said 'depressing.'"

"He seems a good fellow for all that," returns Gaveston kindly.

All seems moving smoothly in Stairs' favour, when suddenly a small and most unexpected voice breaks in, and check the current.

"He's a nasty, rude man," says Geoffrey, with decision.

"Oh, Geoffrey!" cries his mother. She looks at the boy in a strange way and laughs—a rather uncertain laugh. "What has he done to you?" asks she.

"He pushed me away from him," indignantly.

"What a scoundrel!" exclaims his father,

laughing. "Deserves killing, in my opinion. What shall we do with him, Geoffrey? Hang, draw, and quarter him?"

"I don't like him," says the boy conclusively.

"That seems to make an end of it," says Wortley, who is looking amused.

"An end of all things," Gaveston is laughing still: "even of this afternoon. I suppose we must go home, Cecilia?"

"I suppose so," Cecilia assents absently. Her eyes are fixed on her little son. What had happened before she came up?

A cloud had settled on her brow, a brow, as a rule, so cloudless! that Nell seeing it, wonders. Cecilia dull—unhappy. It seems impossible. Then, all at once she remembers something. What Cecilia had told her a little time ago, about those horrid bills, and her dislike to tell Peter about them. Though how *anyone* could be afraid to tell Peter anything, seems extraordinary. Well, here is a chance of getting poor old Cissy out of her dumps. Fancy her being unhappy for a few pounds or so when she, Nell, can give them to her.

She is standing next a young oak-tree—a lissome, pretty thing—a sort of replica of herself, and, as though acknowledging it as a brother, she winds her arm round it, and looks quickly towards Wortley.

“Sir Stephen!” cries she, and Wortley, breaking off a conversation with Gaveston with rather undue haste, comes to her.

“Will you be very busy to-morrow?”

“Busy to-morrow? No.”

He looks at her as if a little surprised, and she looks back at him with the most serene smile in the world.

“That’s all right then,” says she. “Because I want to see you.”

Sir Stephen suppresses a still further flow of surprise, and says: “Yes?” interrogatively.

“And alone, too!” Sir Stephen is now too perplexed for words, and she continues, “You know that little strand”—she was going to say “where first I saw you,” but the memory of those horrid shoes and stockings checks her. No, not *that* strand, certainly. “That little strand called the Dead Man’s Cave?”

“It is hard to forget it,” says Wortley.
“The ghastly clings to us.”

“Well, I want to speak to you — and alone!” She nods here most mysteriously at him. “You won’t say a word, will you? and you’ll be there to-morrow at three. That’s the hour when I can best escape. And I *must* see you.”

What an invitation!

“I’ll be there certainly,” says Wortley, looking at her. She receives his glance most kindly, and leaning towards him says:

“Not a word to *anyone*, mind! you promise? Not”—her pretty finger to her lips —“*a word!*”

CHAPTER XVI.

“I would do as I pleased, and doing what I pleased, I should have my will, and having my will, I should be content.”

THE little yellow sea-pansies are opening wide, and spreading themselves all abroad, beneath the sun's rays. The sea lies calm as death. Round the corner, looking eastward from this tiny cave, two or three yachts are lying at anchor in the harbour, scarcely stirring, save for the lazy dipping of them, as they rise and fall, making their salutations to the water.

To-day—that kind and “liberal worldling” is *en fête*. Such a blue sky overhead, and such a splendid gathering of colours under foot. The grey sands dazzling with all the bright delights of the rainbow—now shining softly like the opal, now sparkling like the polished diamond—and there, in the light soil the pansies, and the delicate asparagus, and

the stiff mesembryanthemums. And here—on the shore itself, the pale grey bleaching of the bones of the dead sea-birds.

The day is heavenly sweet. And still—*so* still!

“The radiant summer with her azure eyes,
And flower-crowned head,”

is full upon us, and down here in this quaint spot, hidden from the world, the sweetness of it is intense.

Nell, who had “escaped,” as she called it, earlier even than she hoped for—Geoffrey having gone for a ride with his father—has thrown herself happily upon the sand, and supported by a big boulder behind her, gives herself up to the hour, and the peace of it!

She is feeling singularly happy, which adds to her enjoyment. Poor, darling old Cis. She shall know very soon that the two hundred pounds she wants shall be hers—though, why on earth couldn't she have asked Peter for it?

She laughs aloud as she dwells on Cecilia's

cowardice. Fancy her, Nell, being afraid of anyone She won't be afraid of Sir Stephen, certainly, when he arrives, which will be in about twenty minutes.

The afternoon grows in beauty! Afar—over there—the yachts—that now have loosed their moorings, and are going out to sea, are shining like huge sea-gulls against the pale clear sky. There is no sound anywhere save the stir of the sea in the sunlight, and presently the girl giving in to the charm of it all, sinks backwards, not asleep, yet hardly awake, and lazy—oh, so lazy!

Wortley, who had thought to be the first at this strange tryst, descending the bank that leads to this little beach, stops suddenly.

There she is before him. Lying in the shadow, with her back against a rock and her hands linked behind her head, and her pretty feet stretched out, *clad*, this time in the most irreproachable—the most extravagant—of shoes and stockings.

Her eyes are turned seaward, and her whole air is so full of the idleness of the happy hour, that she does not hear him until he is

close to her—until indeed he is standing over her—looking down.

“Oh, you’ve come,” cries she. She laughs and springs to her feet. “In good time! I hardly expected you for another ten minutes, and do you know, I was nearly asleep.”

“The day is warm,” says Wortley, as though hardly knowing what he says. The girl standing there in her blue frock is so beautiful, with those dark, drowsy eyes, that speak of slumber still, and her lips half parted, and around her all the silence, the calm of this wonderful pink afternoon. Not a sound anywhere except :

“The soft sweep of the breathless bay.”

“Isn’t it delightful?” says Nell. “Why can’t it be summer always? I hate winter with its frosts and its general dulness. To-day, now *look* at to-day!” She flings out her slender arms towards the sea and sky as if in happy laudation of their charms. And Wortley tells himself that they might well send back a great hymn of praise to *her*. Is she not as beautiful as they? Nay, is she not

one with them, part of them, as all beauty is one of a great whole—blending, mingling for ever?

He had felt the day almost oppressive as he came down, but now it is perfect. Just warm enough, but not too warm; without a want anywhere. It seems to him that she—this pretty creature—has created this blessed change. Even her frock seems to have something to do with it—that pale blue cambric; so blue, so comforting—surely it helps to calm, to tone, as it were, this maddening sun.

“Come under this rock,” says Nell, “the heat out there is dreadful.” There is not the faintest suspicion of confusion in either her face or manner. She seems only unfeignedly glad to see him, and beckons him into her shelter under the sloping rock, with the very friendliest air.

Wortley, having propped himself against the comparative coolness of it, she gives him her huge white umbrella to hold over both of them; an umbrella elaborately trimmed with most expensive lace.

"Aren't you longing to know why I wanted to see you?" asks Miss Prendergast gaily, when she has settled herself into a comfortable position on one of the ledges.

Wortley looks at her—at the delicate little face and clear eyes, and smiling, rather mutinous mouth. To anyone else in the world an answer to this leading question would be easy—but to her—the clear eyes forbid it.

"I confess to a touch of curiosity," says he, smiling in turn.

"Well, I *had* to see you really—and alone. It would never have done to let Cecilia know about it."

"No? Yet your sister doesn't look like the orthodox dragon."

"Oh, poor darling, *No!*" She makes this defence of Cecilia with quite a huge capital. "But you see if she had been told about it, she would never have let me meet *you*."

The emphasis is strong. Wortley begins to feel like a first-class misdemeanant.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Gaveston has a very poor opinion of me," says he. At which Nell first

stares, and then catching it, breaks into merry laughter.

“Oh, you’re all wrong,” says she. “It isn’t that at all ! Why, do you know she holds you up to me morning, noon and night, as a perfect specimen of mankind ? But,” with a little saucy *moue*, “I daresay she is wrong there too. I see through her. She only wants me to behave prettily to you, because you are in a sense my guardian.”

It occurs to Wortley that perhaps Cecilia would hardly think she was behaving herself just now. Here alone on this isolated strand. It seems, however, to smoothe matters a little when he remembers what an immaculate person Mrs. Gaveston has made him out.

“If even in a sense your guardian,” says he, “I think I ought to know what is your trouble at this moment. A trouble you cannot even tell to your sister——”

“Oh, Cissy ! least of all,” says Miss Prendergast. Her smile has died now, she looks a little anxious—a little eager. Wortley looks at her—uncertain—strange.

“I suppose there is something I am to do

for you," asks he quietly. There is calm question in his eyes.

"There is. There is indeed," says the girl eagerly. "I want—" she pauses and looks at him with all her heart in her eyes.

"You want?"

"Money," says Nell with a little jerk.

"Again?" says Wortley smiling. "What an extravagant child. Why, it is only two months ago, just before you came here, that you drew a cheque for £100."

"I know," says Nell airily, "and it's gone. I don't know where really—but it's gone. There is so little in a hundred pounds, isn't there?" says she, who, until six months ago had never felt more than five pounds in her pocket at a time, and that only very occasionally.

"That made two hundred out of the three your aunt settled yearly on you," says Wortley in a quiet sort of a way. "It seems dreadfully impossible, of course, but——"

"Oh, no, not a *bit* impossible," quickly. "I've been very extravagant, I'm afraid, but—I'm going to be better after this. And

—and what I want now is *more* even than that.”

“More than a hundred pounds?”

“Yes, more!” Sir Stephen grows thoughtful. This child—this baby—what can she want with so much money?

“You have gone into it, I suppose,” says he. “You understand, don’t you?”—he is becoming quite pathetic—“that you have only £300 a year, and that you have already spent £200, and that there are yet six months before——”

“I know—I know—” lightly. She gets under the umbrella which he has rather tilted to one side, and so brings herself nearer to him. “But what does that matter? What I want to tell you is, that if I can’t have £200 at *once*, I shall be the most wretched person on earth. You wouldn’t,” smiling at him, such a lovely smile, “like me to be *that*——”

“Am I to understand,” says Wortley suddenly, “that you——”

“Yes, of course. I want two hundred pounds. There must be a way of getting it.”

"There is a way, certainly," says Wortley slowly. "But it is impracticable."

"Impracticable!"

"I am afraid so." Sir Stephen's face has grown very grave. "What you want me to do is, I suppose, to advance you this two hundred pounds out of your capital?"

"Yes, yes," eagerly.

"I am sorry to say that cannot be done," slowly. "It's quite impossible."

"Impossible." The girl turns on him, an angry light now in her eyes. "*What* is impossible?"

"It is impossible that I can sanction your breaking into your capital."

"You mean you will not help me?"

"I cannot help you to do away with your money."

"If it is my money"—her eyes are brilliant now, her lips pale—"I suppose I can do what I like with it?"

"Why do you look at it like that?" says he gently. "Surely you must know how it is— that I would gladly do all I could for you,

but your money—it is a trust. I have given my word—I——”

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself to make excuses,” says she, impatiently. “I don’t want excuses. I wanted you to *help* me, but it seems you won’t do that.”

“How can you say I won’t? The truth is, I cannot; you know I gave my word to your aunt.”

“I don’t know why you did. I don’t know what you had to do with me at all. You had never seen me—you knew nothing of me. I think,” with ill-suppressed anger, “it was a— a very *extraordinary* thing of you, to say the least of it, to elect yourself my guardian.”

“If I had done so, I should quite agree with you. I should even go farther and call it”—with a glance at her, that shows her he has read her thoughts and is supplying the word she would have used—“a very impertinent thing for me to do.”

“Still you allowed yourself to be elected,” says she, flushing a little, and growing the more angry because of his intuition. “What I cannot understand is, why my aunt made

you my guardian. You," throwing up her head with open and distinct hostility in voice and eye, "are nothing to me—nothing at all—*less* than nothing."

Sir Stephen, laughs, a little grimly, however.

"You need not be so emphatic," says he, "there is no need to stamp it on my mind. I know it. I am nothing to you, and on the whole I was very little to your aunt. Merely the son of an old friend. She took some con . . . some unfounded fancy to me, and sent for me on her death-bed, and implored me to do this thing."

He pauses. It comes to him now again, the remembrance of that dying bed with its aged occupant, and the light and airy fashion in which he had consented out of pure kindness to do what she desired of him. Good Heavens! what a benighted fool he had been. The poor old lady could hardly have known what a burden she was laying upon him, so he absolves her from all blame, but he, himself—might have given a thought to himself! Absolution is not for him truly. He had pitied her, and she had been a dear friend of

his mother's, but even her respect and gratitude could not make up for the unutterable discomfort of the present situation.

He hardly himself understood why Mrs. Sinclair had made him her trustee ; there was always Gaveston ; but the fact was that the old lady on Cecilia's marriage—some years before—had heard that this frivolous niece, Nell's sister, had married a man much older than herself for his money ; she was unfortunately a romantic old lady, and “for his money” sounded like heresy in her ears. She had at once decided that Gaveston was ninety.

She, herself was seventy, and did not consider that so very much on ! No one could call *her* old. She, who could run up and down stairs like a girl, and be up at six in the morning, to rout the maids out of their lazy slumbers, and who could darn a table-cloth without glasses, and weed a bed with the best of them—*she*, thank God, was not ninety.

She had never seen Cecilia—“ Cecilia the Frivoller,” as she called her, being always well up to date—but she had decided upon

her for all that. She was worldly, despicable, and she had married a doddering idiot who could not possibly be trusted to look after her, or anything.

Certainly not after Nell, who was very inclined to be flighty, too! The old lady had the lowest opinion of both her nieces, having cordially disliked their mother. And even if "old Gaveston" *were* capable of doing anything, still—she always called him "old Gaveston," though she had seen as little of him as of Cecilia—an old man like that could not live long. And it would take someone very much alive to check Nell.

She had been told at various times that Peter Gaveston was still, comparatively speaking, young. Not as young as his wife, of course, but certainly in the prime of life, but she always forgot when the letters were burned, and reverted to her first impression; and indeed she sank gradually into her grave believing that he, had he been honest, would have gone there before her; but he had defied Nature, and bad would come of it. She heartily despised Peter as the end came.

“How could I refuse her?” says Wortley, after a moment or two. “She was dying, she implored me. It seemed a simple thing then. And you must remember I didn’t then know——” he hesitates.

“Me?” asks Nell defiantly.

“Well,” slowly, “yes.”

“Perhaps,” says she, her voice now vibrating with some undefinable feeling. “You think you know me now?”

“Give me some credit,” says Wortley with a peculiar smile.

“You *don’t*, any way,” says Nell.

She is by this time in full mutiny; one knowing her could see it by the droop of the lids over the brilliant eyes.

“You don’t half know me! And I think the hour will come when you will wish you didn’t know me, *at all!*”

There is something almost threatening in her attitude as she says this; and her lips look as though they would have said: “I am going to lead you *such* a life!”

“Possibly,” says Wortley calmly. “Of course I can see how annoyed you must be

about all this. I have been put over Gaveston's head for one thing, and——”

“You have been put over *my* head—that is a great deal worse,” says Nell, passionately. She has forgotten now all about that first wilful determination to bring him to her feet, and to punish him for that terrible day when she had been discovered by him shoeless and stockingless. She is forgetful now indeed of everything, but his hateful refusal to help her to help Cecilia. Anger burns within her impulsive breast, and hatred, towards him—The Tyrant! She has already clothed him in big capitals. “I can't think *why* that dreadful old woman did it, except to annoy me.”

“I am sure she thought she was doing what was best for you. You are very young. And she was old, and a little eccentric, and——”

“Eccentric?” she glances up quickly. “If she were eccentric, why can't her will be changed?”

“Perhaps it might be. But you forget”—Sir Stephen smiles involuntarily—“if it were to be disputed, you would, in all pro-

bability, find yourself without the money in question."

"And without you too," says Nell, quickly, impulsively. A moment later, she is honestly ashamed of her words, but without the desire to withdraw them. There is a dead silence, that lasts for nearly a minute; she breaks it uncomfortably.

"It ought to have been Peter."

"Nobody could possibly wish more heartily than I do, that it *had* been Gaveston," says Sir Stephen deliberately, whose temper, not a perfect one at any time, is now beginning to fail him.

"It isn't half as bad for you, as it is for me," says Nell, flashing an angry glance at him.

"There you must allow me to differ with you."

"At all events there is one comfort," says Miss Prendergast, taking her knees into her embrace, and looking steadily at the calm and shining sea. "I shall soon be twenty-one, and then——"

"You will be able to make ducks and drakes of your money as quickly as you like."

“I wasn’t going to say that,” indignantly. “I was going to say that then you would be mercifully delivered from me.”

She smiles, a rather imperfect smile, that has something of scorn in it.

“True,” returns Wortley.

I suppose, in her vanity, she had expected something more than this polite agreement with her own words. At all events there is a certain haste about the manner in which she rises and prepares to go homewards.

“Good-bye,” says she, holding out a very limp little hand.

“May I not,” indifferently, “see you home?”

“No. Oh, no, thank you,” with exaggerated civility. “It is very good of you to suggest it, but I am going to see an old woman on my way, so I will not trouble you.” She moves on a step or two, and then all at once the hateful idea of having to go home, and confess to Cecilia that she has *failed*, that she will not be able to help her—and all because she could not subdue Sir Stephen—because she was unable to make

him do her bidding, cuts sore into her heart. Why, she had almost *boasted* to Cecilia that she could have her own way with him, at any time, for any object!

Humiliation lies before her. Even Cecilia's need lies prostrate before this crush to her vanity.

She turns and looks back at Wortley—to his horror, he sees that her eyes are full of tears.

"Is it *quite* impossible then?" says she.

"In *that* way," returns he hurriedly.

"You speak," eagerly, and coming a little nearer to him, "as if," her colour rising, and dyeing most sweetly her young and charming face, "there might be *another* way?"

Wortley hesitates. Of course—of course she does not understand, but the moment is bitter. Is there after all a grain of truth in all the hard things that have been said for generations about the Prendergasts? Does *she* inherit——?

"I could procure it for you," slowly.

"Procure it? You mean——?"

"I could lend it to you," says he distinctly.

He does not look at her as he says this, but when no answer comes, he turns his eyes on her.

Her face is quite changed. It was angry a moment ago, with the petulant anger of an unreasonable child; but now it is cold and set. The eyes are shining, but the lips are firmly set. She looks as though she wants words, but cannot find them, and even after Wortley's eyes break the spell, and speech comes to her, still ideas fail her.

"*Sir Stephen!*" mutters she in a choking tone, and turning, goes swiftly away with her pretty head very high upheld.

It is perhaps the most distinct snub Sir Stephen has ever had in his life, yet, strange to say, it leaves no sting behind it. Rather a deep sense of relief, of satisfaction. What is this troublesome child to him, that her notions of right and wrong, her honour, or feminine delicacy of feeling, should trouble him? It is impossible to account for it, but it is with a light heart and step that he too goes homeward.

CHAPTER XVII.

“So well she’s masked under this fair pretence,
An infidel would swear she’s made of perfect innocence.”

“WHERE *have* you been, Nell?” says Cecilia in a fretful tone. She is lying on a lounge in her boudoir with her head buried in pillows, and a pale blue silk handkerchief. Pale blue, if you can’t get green, is the best thing for making one look ill.

“Is your head hurting you?” asks Nell, advancing anxiously, but noiselessly.

“Oh yes—of course. It is always aching, I think. And I had another letter from that horrid frock woman to-day; she says she must have that money. Fancy! A paltry two hundred pounds, and to be so disagreeable, too, considering all I have spent with her. I don’t know what I shall do, I’m sure. I suppose I’ll *have* to tell Peter.”

“I can’t think why you hesitate,” says Nell hastily; seeing Cecilia so prostrate, so

evidently overcome, a second wave of wrath against Sir Stephen rises within her breast. It is impossible to let things go without telling Cecilia that at all events she has done her best for her. That she has tried her hardest to give her some of her money—and failed. Failure spells chagrin, and it is with a distinct feeling of humiliation that she makes up her mind to tell Cecilia “all about it.”

“I can’t think myself,” says Cecilia.

“Peter is so good,” puts in Nell, with a view to staving off the evil moment of confession as long as possible.

“Ah! that is just it! I really think he is perfect,” says Peter’s wife, rising on her elbow and growing positively emphatic, “that is what makes him so impossible. If I could find a fault in Peter, I believe I should li—*love* him better than I do. But——Do you know, Nell?” She pauses: with an impulsive gesture she flings the blue silk kerchief off her head, and then, as if recollecting herself, throws it on again with a swift glance at the door. To Nell watching

her, a vague, half-sickening feeling comes ; is Cecilia altogether real ? Has she been posing ? *Making herself up* for some occasion ? Cecilia's pale face, and feverish air reproach her, for these thoughts. Even if posing, she is certainly suffering.

"Do you know," Cecilia is saying, "that—it's ridiculous, of course—but I'm a little bit afraid of Peter."

"Of Peter ?"

"Not of *him*, you know, but of what he's *thinking* ; I have a fancy that he thinks a great deal—a great deal that he never *says*."

"Why, that is the way with everybody."

"With everybody ? Yes, perhaps—but I tell you this, Nell, if ever Peter is driven to say any unpleasant thought of his, there will be bad work all round. It is the quiet people who are always so dreadful in the long run ; like the Genii, they are bottled up all their lives, and when some unforeseen circumstance sets them free, they upset the whole apple-cart."

"Let us hope circumstances will stand to us," says Nell, "and keep the cork *well* in ;

in the meantime, I insist on saying you are slandering Peter."

"Well, you'll see."

"I'm sure I hope I shan't," says Nell, at which they both laugh, Cecilia somewhat frugally.

"Of course I know perfectly well," says she, twisting gracefully round, and commencing a tattoo upon the ivory table near her, "that he would do anything on earth for me—*anything*. I am certain if I told him now about this wretched bill," pettishly thrusting from her a letter lying in the folds of her white gown, "he would not say one cross word to me, but he would think about it! He would think me extravagant."

"Well, so you are," says Nell bluntly. "But one wouldn't mind one's husband thinking *that*!"

It would seem from this speech that there is quite a gay old time awaiting Miss Prendergast's husband.

"One would, if one's husband was Peter. Besides, he wouldn't use the word 'extravagant,' it would be 'dishonest' with him. He

used it that last time—so sweetly, so *kindly*, you will understand, but I haven't forgotten it."

"One would think you had," says Nell, and then catches her breath.

Her sister stares at her. If Nell had feared her anger from this rather sarcastic little speech, she finds herself mistaken.

"Don't cultivate that sort of thing," says Cecilia earnestly. "You'll never get married if you do! There isn't a soul on earth to whom irony, when directed against *itself*, isn't abhorrent. Even your good looks won't pull you through, if you persist in it. And as old maids are a blot on creation, I hear they are going to bring in a bill to shoot them!"

At this pleasantry they both laugh, Nell the more eagerly in that she is glad to escape with so small a scolding, though to do Cecilia justice scolding is always far from her. Perhaps, being so incessantly in need of it herself, she has a fellow feeling for other delinquents.

"Nell," says she suddenly, feeling a sort of

increased *camaraderie* towards her sister, because of this incidental spurt of laughter. "I'll tell you something," she pulls the girl towards her. "It is a secret, mind! It has never passed my lips before. But——" she breaks off, "you will never so much as think of it again?"

"Never!"

"Well, then, the fact is—I was never in *love* with Peter. Not actually in love. See? I'm *fond* of him, you know, especially since Geoffrey came—but . . . it was a hurried thing, and mother . . . you remember, don't you?—it used to be *all* mother and not a *bit* of us girls. And—well—I don't regret it, you understand, only—— And as you say, he is so good. And I'm quite happy with him, *quite*. You musn't run away with things, you know."

She pauses.

"No, no." Nell is looking rather pale.

"I'm coming to the funny part of it," says Cecilia, leaning back and laughing an airy, very joyless laugh. "What I want to tell you is that, though I'm not exactly in love

with Peter, I want him to respect me! There—it's out. I—you're laughing, aren't you?"—with another very nervous laugh of her own—"It isn't a bit like me, is it? But I confess I value his respect more than anything in the world. That"—naïvely—"is why I am so afraid of him."

She ceases, but Nell says nothing.

"Come!" says Cecilia, sitting up on her couch, and making a faint grimace at her sister. "You never thought I was born to respect anything in Heaven or earth, did you?"

"Why not?" asks Nell. There is some pain in her voice. "You know right well what I think of you."

"Do I?" She flings herself back amongst her cushions. "I don't then. I don't believe I know what anyone thinks of me, and sometimes"—with a reckless upward movement of her head—"I don't care what they think."

"You have a headache, you are unnerved." Nell bends tenderly over her. "It is this horrid bill. *Tell* Peter."

"No," says Cecilia, with sudden determination. "I shall not do that." She rises to her feet, and flings the blue scarf from her on the floor. "I *thought* I could do it. I wound my head up in that handkerchief to make myself look ill before him, to enlist his sympathy; he's wretched when I'm ill. . . . All a pretence, you see, Nell, all a pretence! I'm only a drifting bit of froth upon the ocean of life—a bubble, a fraud. But I'll pretend no more to-day. And I shan't tell Peter—I haven't the courage. Come, let us talk of something else. Where were you this morning?"

"I can't bear to tell you."

"Why?" Cecilia regards her with astonishment.

"I met Sir Stephen down on Deadman's Beach, and I asked him to let me have this two hundred pounds you want so badly, and——"

"You didn't mention *me*?" colouring hotly.

"No, of course not."

"Well"—anxiously—"well?"

“He said he could not let me encroach upon my principal, or my capital, or something like that. I felt so *mad*.” Tears rise to her eyes. “I said all I could, I even—entreated. But, wasn’t it” — choking — “horrid of him?”

“*Beast!*” says Cecilia briefly, but forcibly.

“So you see I can’t be of any use to you,” says Nell, sorrowfully.

“Nonsense, you’re the joy of my life,” declares Cecilia laughing. “And I’m only sorry you had such a bad time with Sir Stephen, especially,” with a sharp sigh, “as no good came of it.”

“But what will you do now? You will have to tell Peter.”

“I couldn’t,” says Cecilia dismally.

No one had heard the door open.

“What can’t you tell me?” asks Gaveston, standing on the threshold, and looking in a rather questioning way at his wife.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Sweet mercy is nobility’s true badge.”

“Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it.”

“So many things that I hardly know where to begin,” says Cecilia, so lightly, so airily, so entirely without an *arrière pensée* of any kind, and with such a radiant, brilliant smile, that Nell’s heart stands still. And then, all in a moment, the girl goes forward straight to Peter, and quickly, sharply, yet tenderly, tells the whole story to him. She never knew *how* she did it, or even quite *why* she did it—but now it is done, and Gaveston has turned to his wife—that lovely penitent in a lovely gown—who is standing with her head a little bent, as it should be, but her eyes, as they have been since the story began, firmly fixed on Peter.

“Why couldn’t you have told me this yourself?” asks Gaveston. It is his sole reproach. He looks a little older, a little

graver—no more. He even smiles as his eyes meet hers.

“I’m sorry,” says the lovely Cecilia, advancing to him with her hands outstretched, and the nervous smile of a child upon her lips. “But I couldn’t *make* myself do it. You know I promised you, Peter, never to get into debt again, and really I don’t know how this horrid two hundred pounds mounted up—so what I hoped was, that I could borrow the money from Nell, and say nothing to you about it, because I knew it would vex you.”

Gaveston gazes at her. She is always a surprise to him.

“But, my dear, isn’t that getting into debt?” asks he mildly.

“*To Nell?*” arching her pretty brows.

“In debt to *me?*” cries Nell in astonishment, and indeed, here both the sisters laugh as if at one of the funniest things in the world.

Gaveston, who is a slow man, feels unequal to the explaining of this bit of principle, so declines upon more open ground.

"If you must borrow, let it be from me," says he, "and then you will be in no one's debt."

"Yes, I shall indeed," cries Cecilia radiantly. "And to the dearest of all kind dears." Her pallor has disappeared, her eyes are sparkling, her lips smiling. The pale blue handkerchief is under her foot. "But I'm afraid you think badly of me, Peter," her head a little on one side, her glance half roguish, half appealing. "However, it is the last time really! From this out I shall be positively *parsimonious*."

At this Nell smiles, and Peter Gaveston, as though suddenly struck with an idea, turns to her.

"And how was it that you were prevented from lending this money?" asks he.

"Why, Sir Stephen," says Nell, with a shrug. "He refused to let me have what," defiantly, "is my own."

Gaveston colours dark red.

"You asked Wortley for money for——?"

"No, no, no!" cries the girl, shocked.

"Dear Peter, no. Of course I mentioned

nothing beyond the fact that I wanted the money. For myself, you know. After all," with a tender glance at Cecilia, who is now ruffling up her beautiful hair before a mirror, with both hands, "Cecilia is myself."

"I must, however, request, Penelope" (Penelope is Miss Prendergast's whole name), "that for the future you will not lend any money to your sister. When she wants it—she can come to me."

It occurs to poor Nell, as a little piece of injustice, that Peter is far more angry with her for merely wishing to lend the money to Cecilia, than with the latter for having wanted to borrow it and for getting into debt—and for having concealed matters—and all the rest of it.

"Don't scold Nellie," says Cecilia, turning round with a gay and smiling face. "Scold me. *I'm* the culprit. Sit down here, Peter," patting the lounge on which she now has seated herself, "and give me a regular 'talking to.' That's what Jones says her father does to *her*."

A faint contraction of Gaveston's brow is

noticeable. It lasts only for a moment. Nell, perhaps, is faintly conscious of it. That allusion to Jones's father——That Cecilia meant anything was absurd, and surely the very fact of her saying it so unconsciously shows that she herself does not see that at certain times—a time such as this, for example—when she is glowing, and Gaveston depressed—she might easily be taken for his daughter.

“I don't think I'll give you that ‘talking to ’ to-day,” says he smiling. Is there sadness in the smile? “We'll let it hold over.”

“Over my head? Like the nasty old sword of somebody?” cries Cecilia, clasping her slender white hands above her sunny hair, and peeping at her husband from under them, as if in great dismay. “Oh! you mustn't do that! How can I enjoy myself at our dance if you aren't *quite* friends with me? By-the-bye, Peter,” in the airiest way, “what shall I wear?”

“If it's coming to petticoats, I'm off,” says Gaveston, who has quite recovered his spirits since his wife's coquettish glance at him from

under her pink palms. He goes to the door, and then stands still.

“You’ll want a dress for that,” says he.

“Ye—es.”

“Allowance all gone?”

She spreads her hands abroad in desolation.

He laughs. Such a good, round, honest laugh.

“Will twenty do it?”

“Oh! *Peter!*” ecstatically. “*Much*, too much!”

“Still”—he evidently understands her in *some* ways—“we’ll make it twenty!”

“Nell, do you hear that?” Peter’s wife springs to her feet. “Isn’t he generous— isn’t he *too* good?” she appeals to the girl in the lightest way. Her manner, indeed, has all the air of one who is speaking to another about a mutual acquaintance, or a cousin, or a relation by marriage—a nice creature, but remote. A friend, in fact, in whom, for the first time, she has discovered a most desirable virtue. It is certainly, at all events, *not* the tone of a wife discussing a husband.

She steps blithely towards Peter, on the tips of her toes.

"Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*" cries she, so prettily. Then all at once, with a sudden change of manner, she stands back from him, and regards him with a sombre air.

"Peter!" breathes she tragically, "look to yourself! I feel I *must* do it! Prepare for the worst! I know—I know I am going to—*kiss you!*"

With this, she precipitates her slim self into his embrace.

They all laugh. Gaveston clasps her to him, and gives her three kisses for her one.

"Nell," cries she, pushing him lightly from her, "I had almost forgotten. Why, this is the day we promised to go to Lady Hopkins. Hurry, hurry, hurry! and dress yourself. Not coming, Peter? What a *shame!* How do you suppose I am going to get on without you? Really, this is cruel neglect of a lovely wife. Some day, when I don't come back, you'll be sorry."

She throws him a kiss, and disappears into her dressing-room beyond. She has forgotten, as though it had never been, her distress of an hour ago.

CHAPTER XIX.

“Whoso shall telle a talë after a man,
He moste reherse, as neighe as ever he can,
Everich word, if it be in his chargë,
All speke he never so rudely and so largë;
Or ellës he moste tellen his tale untrewe,
Or feinen thinges, or finden wordës newe.”

“QUITE a sensation, this dance of yours, Mrs. Gaveston.” The speaker is a good-looking boy from the Barracks at Boreton, who had fallen a victim to Mrs. Gaveston’s charms very early in the afternoon. Cecilia, in her latest Parisian gown, and with a big picture hat on the top of her head, gives him a smile. She is sitting on a garden chair, on a side bit of Lady Hopkins’ lawn, that overlooks the sunk tennis-courts on her left. The game below is growing very exciting. Lady Hopkins, kindest of women, has got up a small tournament to amuse her “young friends” (as she calls everyone—good creature—under sixty), and has given into Mr. McGregor’s

hands a dear little gold bangle and the inevitable cigarette-case, to be presented to the successful tennis players at the end of the day. There was quite an excitement about it an hour ago, when the drawing for partners was taking place. Up to this, a dilapidated young man, with a lantern jaw, and a racket tied up with string, is having it all his own way. He had been lucky enough to draw as his partner one of the Miss Woods of Woodville, who, ten years ago, had been the champion players of the county, and who still can do wonders by fits and starts. The Miss Wood in question is named Susannah, she is tall and gaunt, her complexion somewhat suggestive of leather.

"Been stationed here now," goes on the good-looking boy, who has accepted the smile as the prettiest answer to his opening remark he has ever heard, "for ten months, and never heard of a dance before."

"Never heard of a dance before? You ought to take dancing lessons," says Cecilia.

The most satisfactory thing in the world is to be beautiful. This answer of Cecilia's is

accepted as quite a sparkling piece of wit by all the young men around her ; even Stairs, who is sitting about a yard away, and who is studying her without seeming to do so, smiles faintly.

“ So awfully jolly of you to think of it,” says another young man, whose sole claim to notoriety lies in the fact that he has no chin. “ This part o’ world, you know, really beastly dull, you know ! ”

“ I love it ! ” says Mickey, who has just come up with Nell and Grant. “ I quite acknowledge that Bigley-on-Sea can hardly be called the ‘ *liveliest* village of the plain,’ but it has its parts ! There’s nothing to do here. That’s what I love. Splendid recommendation in my eyes.”

“ Oh, your eyes ! ” says Nell, *sotto voce*. “ I don’t believe they see anything.”

“ They do, my darling. They do. They see you,” says the Irishman, with a profound sigh that comes from his—lungs.

“ Nell,” calls Cecilia, “ come here ! We’re talking about our dance ! ”

Nell turns, and Cecilia introduces the two

cavalry men to her, whereupon the chinless one, without a second's delay and to Grant's open annoyance, draws a chair up to hers, and begins to give her—poor girl!—his views on things in general.

Grant, who had commenced a steady flirtation with Nell, half because she is the prettiest girl in the neighbourhood, and half to please his sister, who is never tired of dinning in his ears the fact that three hundred a year would be a great addition to his present income, has ended by falling very seriously in love with her. His folly has, indeed, at present grown to such a height, that to see another man, however poor a specimen, engross her attention for even five minutes, means misery. He fidgets a great deal—dragging his tent stool here and there, and dropping fragmentary remarks into the conversation, that Nell is keeping up—poor “Mr. Chin” being unequal to a protracted attack upon his brain.

Nell, who, I regret to say, is rather enjoying the situation, being in a very bad mood of her own, encourages “Mr. Chin,” whose real name is Trent, in the most shameful

fashion, to Mickey's immense delight, whose chief work in life seems mischief.

Mrs. Chance, strolling up to the large group who are gathered here, looking at the semi-finals, finds herself unavoidably close to Mrs. Cutforth-Boss. She accepts her fate gracefully, and sinks, as if delighted to find it, upon a seat close to her scourge.

"How terribly fast those two seem to be!" says she in a confidential whisper, indicating Mrs. Gaveston and her sister by a side glance. This remark is sure to be acceptable to the valuable, if hateful, Maria; both the Prendergasts being "objected to" by her.

"There is even a worse thing than flirtation," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss magisterially. Slowly and with indignant meaning she surveys Mrs. Chance from head to heel, from the so evidently new frock, to the dainty bonnet, that has not a particle of crape upon it. "There is extravagance!"

"You mean this dress?" asks Mrs. Chance, in the sweetest, lowest tones.

"*And* the bonnet," severely.

"I half feared you would, but," she struggles

for a lie, and at last finds one; "it was dear Alec gave me the money for them. A gift, you know. 'Buy any little present you like,' he said, so delightfully. So *few* brothers are like that!"

"And a good thing, too!" says Mrs. Boss. "Your brother ought to have advised you to put by whatever money he gave you—(and really he must be a most extraordinarily affectionate brother to give you enough money to buy yourself this rig-out)," with an exhaustive glance at the costume in question through her glasses, "for a rainy day."

"Perhaps there won't be any rainy days," says Mrs. Chance, innocently, who is now boiling with rage. "The weather seems fine."

This little speech she could not have held back to save her life, but once said, and seeing the storm it is bringing up in the useful cousin's brow, she grows frightened.

"Forgive me," says she, laying her hand on Maria's arm. "Such a silly joke! Of course I know I am all wrong, and you—you are so kind—to interest yourself about me. Yes, I daresay I have been extravagant, but

Alec would have been disappointed if I had not bought these things. I can't tell you how long I fought with myself about buying them, but when I thought of his self-sacrifice—his giving out of his slender income, so much, that I might——”

“Play the fool! He must be an idiot!” says Mrs. Boss, interrupting her without apology.

“Oh, no! Only the kindest brother in the world,” with an appealing smile. After a second she drops her eyes, afraid they may betray her. At this moment she could willingly have done bad things to the perfect Maria. “I am afraid you are angry with me,” she goes on meekly. It is easier to be meek with her eyes on the ground. “But I hardly knew what to do. If I saw more of you—but you come to us so seldom—I might learn.”

“You would learn this!” says Mrs. Boss in a loud tone. “That for a woman with nothing a year to dress herself in all the newest fashions, is to be simply—dishonest. . . . Good gracious! There is Mrs. Wilding

over there! Actually *out*. And her baby not two months old. Stay here, Bella. I'll be back in a moment, when I have given her a hint about her behaviour. You were saying something about those unfortunate Prendergast girls—I have something to say too."

She strides across to where a tall young woman in pale grey crepon is standing.

"Wretch!" says Mrs. Chance under her voice. "Well, when I marry Stephen, I'll be the head of the house, and after that—well, I pity Maria." Her eyes are aflame, and though in this second of emancipation, when she might have uplifted them to the skies for all Maria could see of them, she still keeps them on the ground. It would not do to lose a point—someone *else* might be looking.

Presently Mrs. Boss comes back, rather—as Mrs. Chance cheerfully notices—considerably the worse for wear. It is plain that the tall young woman, with her first baby, has routed her with great slaughter.

"You explained to her, I hope, the injudiciousness of her conduct," says Mrs. Chance tenderly and maliciously.

"Some people are not open to advice," returns Mrs. Cutforth-Boss solemnly. "That young woman is devoid of intellect. She would not listen to me. She had even the audacity to say, that when I was as clever as she was, and had given a child to the world, she would be delighted to come over and teach me how to make pap! In my opinion," says Mrs. Boss with conviction, "she is on the right road to perdition."

"What a big long road it must be." Mrs. Chance pauses thoughtfully. "It must be worn into holes sometimes, so many travel it. I wonder who repairs it! Look at Mrs. Gaveston. Do you know, I quite dread this new complication, this arrival of Captain Stairs—after all you have told me of her. She is so frivolous—no respect for anyone. Not even," with a careful glance, "for you?"

"It is a small thing to me," says Mrs. Boss, "what anyone says or thinks of me. I do my duty; that suffices me. I don't care for the slanders of the crowd. They are nothing to me. But—er—what did that woman say?"

"Hardly a slander, you know. More of a

gibe." It is Mrs. Chance's determination to set Mrs. Gaveston and her sister wrong at all points with everyone she knows. Sir Stephen's half-formed admiration for Nell has not escaped her notice. And to be outdone in that direction! "It was a mere jest, really. But how they laughed——"

"Laughed!—at *me*!"

"Well, yes. And that was what annoyed me, to drag *you* into ridicule. You, who are so full of good works, without whom the village could hardly get on. But I heard her—myself—only a few days ago, make fun of your name. She," Mrs. Chance looks down and lowers her voice, as if shocked, "was bringing you into ridicule about your kindly zeal over the villagers, and your tenants, and friends. She said—I thought it *very* impertinent—that you 'Boss'd the whole show,' or something like that."

"Bossed?"

"Yes. Boss, you know! Your *name*!"

"I see," says Maria. To Mrs. Chance's everlasting surprise, the big woman seems amused. There is a twinkle in her eye. "Do

you know, I never thought of that before ! I wonder if George did ! Boss ! It does sound American, yet it is a good old English name too. I must tell George——” She breaks off. “But that impertinent young woman, to make fun of *me* ! Really, I don’t know whether she or that wretched Mrs. Wilding is the worst !”

“Oh ! I think Mrs. Gaveston ! She is so flighty,” says Mrs. Chance gently. “See her now ; and her husband never with her—and that man always her shadow.”

“Captain Stairs, you mean ?” Mrs. Cutforth-Boss leans forward so as to get a better view of Cecilia, who now, indeed, is evidently engrossed in an animated discussion with Stairs. “Bless me ! Yes. What on earth can Peter Gaveston mean by letting her go about like this, with no one to look after her ? I really think I had better go, and give her a word of warning.”

“No, no, don’t,” says Mrs. Chance, pulling her back. “Stephen”—to Wortley, who is going by—“come here. We want your advice.” She smiles up prettily into his face

from under the dainty new bonnet, and Sir Stephen stands still. "Maria thinks she ought to speak to Mrs. Gaveston about her—her——"

"Her conduct with Philip Stairs," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss bluntly; to do her justice, she is always very open in her conduct—the only pardon that can be accorded to it. "You know there used to be a love affair there, Stephen, years ago—before he went abroad. Bella has just reminded me of it."

"It is well to let sleeping dogs lie," says Wortley. "Not that I think there is anything to let lie in this instance. Gaveston and his wife seem very well disposed towards each other."

"Still—she is so young," says Mrs. Chance, in her tenderest voice, that seems filled with divine pity for all the world. "And when one thinks of the difference in her and her husband's ages. And her sister—she is so young too, and so—so *very* frivolous—that I fear she can hardly be of any use to her. Don't you think Miss Prendergast a little—just a *little* volatile?"

"I wonder what you mean by volatile," says Wortley. "Of course, a young girl cannot be as sedate as a woman married. Youth must be given certain allowances."

Youth! Bella, conscious of her thirty years, colours faintly.

"I am so glad to hear you talk so liberally about her," she says sweetly. "I, myself, would desire to think the best. If she is to be my sister-in-law, I——"

"Your——?" Sir Stephen has turned upon her sharply.

"Oh! you *must* have noticed dear Alec's devotion—and her acceptance of it. I cannot believe she is so wanting in all feeling as to encourage him as she does, unless she means to accept him!"

"It will be a lucky thing for Alec if she does have him," says Maria, with all her fatal bluntness. "Three hundred a year would set him up a bit!"

Wortley says nothing. His mind is occupied with Bella's last words. He glances a little farther on to where Nell is sitting, with Trent talking idiotic nothings to her, and

Grant standing beside her glowering. There can be no doubt on earth about *his* infatuation. And the girl sitting there between them, smiling, plainly amused, careless of their feelings.

Is she so heartless as has been suggested—so frivolous—like her sister? All at once, the old story of Stairs' mad affection for Cecilia, and her cruel disregard of it, once he had gone away, and her almost immediate marriage with Gaveston—a man so much older than her—returns to him. He had forgotten all about it until now.

Indeed, most people had forgotten about that old affair until Captain Stairs' return had reminded them of it. No one quite knows the rights of the story, and (except with regard to a few) but a meagre curiosity stirs anyone when it is mentioned.

Mrs. Gaveston, so petted, so spoiled, the idol of a most indulgent husband, would hardly be likely to think a second time of an attachment felt years ago, and which, if ever it *had* come to anything, would have ended in nothing but poverty. The fact of Stairs

coming into a property yesterday, as it were, had, of course been discussed. Pity it had not been left to him years ago. But after all Mrs. Gaveston had been a mere child then, and really hardly knew what love meant.

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, however, whose relations with the thoughtless Cecilia are considerably strained, and whose memory is above reproach, has remembered everything, and from a high and moral point of view, has decided to keep her eyes open. She had indeed determinedly prognosticated evil from the return of Stairs, to England, and the presence of his first and only love.

“Alec would never take so sordid a view of it,” says Bella, with gentle dignity. “He will marry for love—and love alone. The one who marries for anything else, must be mad indeed.”

She casts a gentle glance at Sir Stephen, but Sir Stephen's eyes are fixed on Nell—Nell, who is laughing as happily as though the whole world is at her feet to play with.

CHAPTER XX.

“The ruling passion, be it what it will,
The ruling passion conquers reason still.”

“Woman’s at best a contradiction.”

“Isn’t there any tea to be had ? ” demands Mrs. Cutforth-Boss suddenly, in a loud tone. “Five o’clock and nothing ! What on earth is the woman thinking about ! ”

“Beer, perhaps,” suggests Mrs. Chance with a little ill-natured titter—the late Sir John having, as has been said, made his money out of that excellent beverage.

“Well, I wish she’d divert her thoughts to tea for a moment or two,” says Maria, who has moved her camp, and seated herself by the group farther on, accompanied by Bella Chance.

At this instant a couple of footmen, with trays, can be seen approaching.

“It’s comin’, it’s comin’,” says little Mr.

Nobbs, who has toddled up with a view of making himself delightful to Cecilia.

"Like the Campbells," suggests Mickey. "By the bye, it's been going on in the tent over there for the last half hour."

"Then I think she might have had the courtesy to send some one to tell us about it," says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss angrily. "Really no one has any manners now-a-days." Her own are so painfully unequal to the necessities of the "now-a-days," of which she speaks, that Cecilia gets behind her fan with a view to getting off a little undiscovered mirth.

"Better late than never," simpers Mr. Nobbs, nodding his small head to and fro, and bobbing upon his toes and heels. "It's"—beginning the inevitable quotation gaily—"The voice of——"

"The footman, I heard him complain. Didn't you?" interrupts Mickey most unkindly. "He was groaning like a grampus under that tray; knew you'd heard him. *Had him there,*" whispers he to Nell. "Took the wind out of his sails, eh? First in?"

"You shall have the Victoria Cross the moment I go home," returns she.

"How much does that come to? A kiss?"

"Poof! don't be silly. Who'd kiss you?"

"Lots and lots of girls," says Mr. McNamara with dignity. He climbs down immediately afterwards, however, and continues sadly, "But always the ones I don't want to kiss."

"Just so," says Nell, unfeelingly, and goes back to her conversation to Trent.

"Who is that extraordinary person to whom that silly Prendergast girl is speaking?" demands Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, of her brother. Sir Stephen is indeed still here, kept he hardly knows why, yet always with an angry idea that it is because he can from this point see best the abominable behaviour of his ward. There is Grant glowering at her, but at her feet none the less; and that idiot Trent, "that unlettered small-knowing soul"—Wortley is evidently growing bitter—whispering absurd attempts at compliments into her ear; and to crown all, McNamara

—— Though perhaps after all, McNamara is the least objectionable of the lot. After all, one would be a perfect idiot to be jealous of *McNamara*. No girl in her senses would believe in him !

But she ! what is she ? A trifle light as air ?

“Don’t know, I’m sure,” says he, walking away. He had meant to speak to Nell—to explain things to her—to break through the cold crust of anger, the result of this morning’s work, that is so extremely awkward now, considering how soon they will have to play together on the courts below. But he gives that up, and walks away in another direction.

“I can see that Sir Stephen so disapproves of that girl,” says Mrs. Chance, softly.

“Stephen is like me,” says Mrs. Cutforth-Boss, who could hardly be more unlike her brother if she tried. “He has a head on his shoulders. He will marry both wisely and well. I look for a title for Sir Stephen.”

Having thus disposed of both Nell and Mrs. Chance, she goes on her way rejoicing, and presently plants herself very close to

Nell, who is still holding all three admirers in lively converse. Mrs. Boss having had her tea, feels now equal to any occasion. But unhappily so does Mr. McNamara, and Mickey once started, is bad to beat. Perhaps he has seen mischief in Maria's rolling eye, because he at once commences the campaign.

"This is my birthday," says he blandly. "Anyone going to give me a show? You? Mrs. Cutforth-Boss."

"I disapprove of giving presents to people who are able to buy them for themselves," says Mrs. Boss.

"But I'm not," says Mickey. "I lost my last halfpenny at Nap last night."

"May I ask," says Mrs. Boss with a glare at Cecilia, "who won it?"

"You'd never guess," says Mickey genially.

"I have a strong belief I *could*," says Maria severely.

"You won't tell?" says Mr. McNamara, bending towards her. "Sh!" with a glance at Cecilia, as if to warn Mrs. Boss not to let *her* hear. "Well, it was——"

"Go on, I know it!"

"You *know* it?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, well, at *that* rate," says Mr. McNamara in an aggrieved tone, "there isn't a bit of good in my telling you."

"But?" eagerly.

"No! no! no!" Mickey shakes his head disapprovingly. "You have deceived me. You have wasted my time. And on my birthday, too!"

Mrs. Cutforth-Boss gives him an angry glance and moves away.

"*This* your birthday?" says Nell, "why, it was only last week I heard you tell Cecilia——"

"That was only the *first* gong," says Mickey unmoved. "A mere gentle reminder. The second has just sounded. I'm of age *to-day*; you wouldn't think it to look at me, would you? I hope"—sweetly—"you have remembered me? Any little present for me?"

"Not one," says Nell severely. "And as to your being of age——"

"Well—what's the matter with that?"

"Nothing, beyond the fact that I'm sure you were of age five years ago."

"Does that prevent my being of age now? How queerly girls argue. You haven't worked those suspenders then?"

"I haven't worked anything," says Miss Prendergast, very rightly turning her back on him. "And you *certainly* told Cecilia your birthday was on some day last week."

"Come for a walk?" says Grant quickly.

"I can't. What's the use?" says she with a faint show of irritation. "I shall have to play in this tournament almost directly. Afterwards—perhaps."

"That is a promise," eagerly.

"Is it?" She gives him a slow, adorable little smile. "Well, we'll see."

"Where's Grant?" cries somebody rushing up at this moment. "Oh, there you are, you're wanted down below there. It's your turn now with Miss Browne. That duffer with the racket tied up is holding his own all through. *Do* get him out if you can."

Grant with a muttered word rises, and leaves the haven where he would be.

"I don't believe you've had any tea yet," says Mickey to Nell, "come over here to this little table," pointing to his left, "and have some fruit, or cake, or something."

Nell, whose good spirits had deserted her when the subject of the tournament was brought up again, follows him, and soon has a plate well supplied with strawberries and cream beside her, and a few wafers.

This ought surely to have raised her to the healthy sense of the good of being alive. But even whilst eating the strawberries, she shows signs of gloom.

Mickey, who is "jabbering as usual"—an expression of Mrs. Wilding's, who calls herself an intimate friend of his, having met him once in Yorkshire—finds at last she isn't attending.

"Well, shouldn't I?" says he, meaning to confound her.

"Shouldn't you what?"

"I knew you weren't listening."

"I was, however. It was something about—about——"

"Oh, yes! *About*. I like that. I was

talking of that last game I played. Did you watch it?"

"You were playing against the man with the bad racket. The racket tied up with a boot-lace, or something."

"I was. May the divil," says Mr. McNamara, piously, "fly away with him and his boot-lace. He beat me, yet I played a good game too, though I say it as shouldn't. I ought to have won that game."

"Well, why didn't you?" says Nell carelessly, who is feeling as though she hates everybody.

"I don't know. If I hadn't dropped that last ball into the net——Anyway, I *ought* to have won the game."

"Then more shame for you. It seems you knew where your duty lay, and didn't perform it."

There is such a want of sympathy in the always delightfully sympathetic Nell, that McNamara regards her closely.

"What's the matter with you?" asks he. "You look down on your luck."

"And no wonder," says Nell; the desire

to speak to somebody is growing too much for her. And Mickey—she loves Mickey—and he is so safe. He would never breathe a word. “I’ll tell you,” says she, leaning towards him across the little table. “Just fancy, I’ve been drawn to play with Sir Stephen!”

“Well!” Mickey has leant towards her in turn, and there is blank misunderstanding in his clear Irish eyes. This seems a poser; Miss Prendergast goes down before it.

“I don’t believe he can play a bit,” says she, a little sorry she has spoken.

“He plays uncommonly well, I can tell you. Better than most.”

“He looks,” contemptuously, “as if he could do nothing.”

McNamara studies her a moment.

“He has done something to you anyway,” says he.

“To *me*?” haughtily.

“Yes. To your own royal, high excellency! I have noticed a sort of chill between you and him all the afternoon; a regular cucumber coldness.”

"You notice a great many things, it seems to me," angrily.

"Well—what are one's eyes for?"

"If you imagine he has annoyed me in any way, you are mistaken. I think him a very disagreeable person—nothing more."

"That won't count in a tournament. He's about the best player I ever met. Private player I mean, but even if it came to public playing—You'll win with him, Nell. You two will be the winners, I shouldn't wonder."

"Oh, no! I shall handicap him too heavily. I can't play a bit when people are looking on. However good a player he may be he will lose with me."

"Not a bit of it. He'll win! Pull yourself together, and the game's your own."

"Well, I don't care whether it is or not," says Nell with a little frown. "I think they might have drawn me with some one else——"

McNamara shakes his head solemnly at her.

"Do you suspect them?" asks he. "Are you suggesting that there was foul play? How could they arrange the drawing? And

even if they *could*, why should they have elected you to be the partner of Wortley?"

"Yes, yes," says she quickly. "Of course it is all right. They would never have put Sir Stephen and me together. Everybody must know I *hate* Sir Stephen."

At this instant someone appears on the right of the table. Neither of them had seen his approach.

"It is our turn now, Miss Prendergast," says Sir Stephen in a perfectly even tone.



CHAPTER XXI.

“All women born are so perverse
No man need boast their love possessing.
If nought seem better, nothing’s worse,
All women born are so perverse.
From Adam’s wife, that proved a curse
Though God had made her for a blessing,
All women born are so perverse,
No man need boast their love possessing.”

NELL rises and goes with him; she is a little perturbed. Had he heard that last speech of hers? No. Surely not. He seems quite as usual. But silent, very silent. His silence gives Nell a chance.

“Sir Stephen!” says she coldly. “It is quite absurd you having me for your partner. I can’t play at all. Is it not possible to get it rearranged? There are so many others, and all such good tennis players. Won’t you see about it?”

“You mean,” says Wortley, speaking for the first time since she has left McNamara and gone with him towards the tennis court.

"You mean that you don't want to play with me."

"Certainly not! What I meant was that it is a pity that you should lose. If *I* withdraw they will have another lottery, and you will probably get some one else who will prove a good partner."

"I have already an excellent partner," says Wortley. He does not look at her as he says it. The compliment falls indeed flat. His voice is cold, indifferent, immovable.

"I am afraid you know very little about it, if you say that," says Nell icily. "I am the worst tennis player in the world—at times."

"I shall risk it." There is something dogged in his air. "And even," slowly, "if you are not up to the mark—to your usual mark, I mean, I have seen you play—I daresay I shall be able to pull you through." There is a distinct determination in his whole manner that annoys her. "To tell you the truth," continues he, without looking at her however, "I distrust that bat of Berkley's—the string that has so nobly held it together up to this, must be nearly worn through now."

“He will probably get a fresh bit.” Nell’s tone is without interest, secretly she is furious at his offer to “pull her through.” Such miserable conceit—such overbearing vanity, etc. “There is one thing, however, I think I had better mention. I,” very clearly, “object to having my balls poached.”

“I shall remember. I have not, however, that objection. If any ball of mine comes your way, and you think you can take it safely, I shall be immensely glad if you will do so.”

Nell makes no reply to this. “Odious man,” she says to herself. It had given her great satisfaction to forbid him to touch her balls, but now that she has done so, her heart sinks. If he *doesn't* help her, the small chance that there is of their winning is entirely at an end; their downfall will be an ignominious one indeed, and to be connected with defeat—! Defeat is always bitter to her!

But to go back now—to give in—and to him. To ask him to help her! No. It is not to be thought of for a moment. After

all, if he does lose, it will be a very good thing, and make him less assured of himself in the future. It is unpleasant, however, to be the one to make him or anyone lose. Oh! if only she could play up for once in her life, and help to win this match without his assistance. Sometimes she can play quite surprisingly, but, unfortunately, not when there is an audience. The very fact of people looking on, and expecting wonders from her, puts her off her stroke.

“Shall I go and see when we are to begin?” asks Wortley courteously.

“Yes. Please.”

Nell, waiting in rather a quaking mood for his return, finds herself standing almost under a huge escallonia bush—half hidden by it indeed. From the other side a voice reaches her.

“Oh! no,” someone is saying. “Poor Sir Stephen! He has not the *least* chance. He plays quite splendidly himself, but he will be far too heavily handicapped by Miss Prendergast to do anything. She——” The voice and its owner have evidently turned a

corner and are gone. The voice was the voice of Mrs. Chance.

All at once a change takes place in Nell. Her heart seems to leap up within her, and grows strong and brave. She gives the racket she is holding a little swing. *That woman! Ah!*

When Sir Stephen, a few minutes later, returns hurriedly to tell her they are to begin now, he finds her looking almost *tall*, with her cheeks delicately flushed, and her eyes alight. What has happened to her? Her very step seems to have caught additional elasticity. He is indeed hard put to it to keep up with her, as she goes to the field of battle. The very way she grasps her racket breathes of slaughter. Positively there is a smile upon her lips. Finally, to his everlasting astonishment, she turns to him as they take their places, and whispers to him, sharply, eagerly:

“We shall win!”

There is a touch of *camaraderie* in her whole air. Has she forgotten the late feud?

* * * * *

“Oh! there is Nell going to play,” cries Cecilia suddenly, “I must get nearer to watch her.” Many people on the seats round her had left and taken up positions farther down, feeling a little pleasurable excitement over this final set. The man with the disreputable racket, and his partner (now looking a little frowsy, and with her hair in a melancholy state of collapse), are looking full of hope and courage, and already indeed quite giving themselves airs—nodding blithely to their intimate friends and backers, as though to say: “It is all right now. The day is ours! If we have beaten all along the line *so* far, there is nothing to dread!” And indeed, a few whispers of Nell’s playing have been circulating—of her want of nerve—her uncertainty—the trick she has of putting her balls into the net, when frightened, etc.

Mrs. Chance especially has been going about breathing little sentences to this effect, and, “Such a pity poor dear Sir Stephen, who really you know plays beautifully, should have been drawn with such an *uncertain* player.”

Cecilia looks round to find someone to

escort her to a better place for looking on ; but Stairs only is beside her. Even the good-looking boy has flitted across the ground to make a bet with a friend on the coming event.

"There is a shady seat over there where you can see well, I think," says Stairs. "Shall we try it?"

Cecilia rises eagerly.

"Darling old Nell, I wish she could win, if only to vex that horrid Mrs. Chance," says she, some of the latter's velvety speeches about Nell having reached her.

The spot chosen by Stairs is a little remote from the others. A small, rustic seat under a huge branching elm, that makes a splendid umbrella to keep off the burning sun, and although it places them a little behind the other onlookers, still there is a capital view of the court and the players.

"Oh, what a lovely spot you have chosen, Phil," says Cecilia, settling herself daintily with her back against the trunk of the grand old tree. All round the scene is very fair—the heat soft and languorous ; a little silken

breeze is blowing, and from the meadows down below small white-brown seeds of thistle-down are floating through the golden air.

“It is the time when lilies blow,
And clouds are highest up in air.”

Stairs, whose every fibre thrills to her voice, pales a little beneath that friendly “Phil.” How it brings back all. Those dear sweet days . . . *all*.

Ever since that hour when he had unexpectedly come upon her and her husband in the wood he had lived in a sort of hell. He had thought of her in many ways during that cruel time in India and afterwards on his return—as married—as happy in her married life—as unhappy—but somehow he had never thought of her as a *mother*!

The sight of the boy Geoffrey had been a death-blow—a stab—from which he could not recover; she—his little love—his sweetheart—the pretty child he had left—the mother of another man’s son!

When first he saw the boy, with his strong likeness to Cecilia, a sort of frenzy seized him.

He knew then what murderers must feel before they commit the vilest crime of all. That she should have borne a son to him—his rival! He could have cursed Gaveston aloud for that. If she had remained childless—God knows what thoughts worked in Philip Stairs' mind, but I think he could have forgiven her more easily—but for the child.

And yet to curse Gaveston! Having seen him it seemed hard—impossible. That kindly honest gentleman! Stairs knew he would have been glad to find him a scoundrel—an irredeemable brute—but Gaveston was a man that no other man could ever despise.

He saw that, being no fool, and his misery grew. Did she love him? Could she? That man—so much older than herself—her sweet, her *lovely* self! It was certainly impossible. The man was lovable in many ways, and there was the boy—the child! That tie of all things the strongest. No, he was cast behind—forgotten—left dying on the road of her life—sighing his time away, with

“Love going out in despair.”

Cecilia has been talking gently all this time—he answering mechanically.

“I really think Nell will win after all,” cries she suddenly, leaning forward, her arms upon her knees. “Oh, what a *beautiful* serve! Did you see how it ran along the ground? He couldn’t take it—that immaculate person with the queer old racket. There again! And Nell—why, she usually can’t play a bit in public, you know—but now——”

“She is doing splendidly,” says Stairs, who in spite of the belief that he is for ever beyond amusement of any kind is now growing interested. “And yet someone told me she couldn’t play a screw.”

“Ah! that was Mrs. Chance, she hates poor Nell,” says Cecilia, whispering to him as one would to an old and appreciated friend. “She’s very dangerous. She’d say *anything* if she didn’t like one.”

“She doesn’t like you!”

“Me! Oh, no. Not a scrap,” says Cecilia. “And I’m so glad. I hate people whom I hate to like *me*!”

"Poor people!" says Stairs.

Cecilia laughs.

"You needn't be so very sympathetic," says she. "I don't hate you!"

"No?" Stairs turns aside abruptly—a branch growing over his head has apparently attracted his attention. "That is good of you," says he in a would-be indifferent tone.

"There, what a stroke," cries Cecilia excitedly. "Why, Nell is excelling herself. Oh! a good serve, again! *Did* you see that? Ah, if only she can keep it up—but poor old Nell is so nervous."

"She doesn't seem nervous to-day."

"No. I can't think why. There *again!*" as Nell, much more to her own surprise than to anyone else's, plays a ball into such an unexpected corner as no man can reach. In fact, Nell is playing to-day as she never played before, and as in all probability she will never play again. Her nerves have turned to steel, and her whole blood is on fire.

"She and Wortley will win," says Stairs.

"I hope so!"—she looks at him. "Don't you?"

“You know I do.” His desire for Nell’s victory is now indeed very keen. He is leaning forward in quite an excited way, and his whole expression has altered. He is another being—he is the man Cecilia had known six years ago.

For a little time she looks at him as if taking in this sudden wonderful change, that, alas! brings back to her the past with most unfortunate vividness. She moves a little nearer to him—she feels happier with him. He is so like what he used to be—her friend—her chum!

“Phil!” says she impulsively.

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